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BUCCANEER BESS, THE LIONESS OF THE SEA. OR, THE RED SEA TRAIL.

A ROMANCE OF THE GULF OF MEXICO AND ITS SHORES.

A COMPANION STORY TO "THE SKELETON SCHOONER," AND "THE GAMBLER PIRATE."

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM,

AUTHOR OF "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," "FREELANCE, THE BUCCANEER," "WILD BILL, THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT,"
"WILD BILL'S GOLD TRAIL," ETC., ETC.



BUCCANEER BESS, THE LIONESS OF THE SEA.

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A Romance of the Gulf of Mexico
and its Shores.

A Companion Story to "The Skeleton Schooner,"
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ZUMA, THE MERCILESS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THREE HOMES BY THE SEA.

A STANCH cabin, if I may so use the word, for it was built of ship-timbers mostly, stood upon a bold point of land jutting out from the coast into what is now known as Mississippi Sound, which is divided from the Gulf of Mexico by a chain of islands, that act as a barrier against the more savage seas rolling in from the deep water.

The cabin was known along the coast as Cliff Cottage, and it was the abiding-place of a man, upon whose life a shadow and a deep mystery hung, and his only child, a maiden of nineteen at the time this story opens.

To the planters and their slaves, the coasters and fishermen, the owner of Cliff Cottage was known as Juan Gito, and his calling was that of fishing for the markets of New Orleans and Mobile, to one of which ports he was wont to go every week or two.

Rumor had it that Juan Gito was a proverbially unlucky fisherman, and yet his cabin was a comfortable one, and it was furnished with really many luxuries, while an air of refinement pervaded all about it, from the flower-dotted lawn to the cosy sitting room, and that fair and tasteful fingers had done much to adorn and beautify the home was evident.

Standing upon the cliff that gave the cottage its name, a grand view was obtainable, for the arm of land jutting into the sea encircled to the eastward, and formed a miniature harbor, where were several small craft lying at anchor, and three or four skiffs drawn upon the snowy sand.

The cottage stood back from the point a hundred yards, and with a plot of grass and flower-beds in front, a winding path to the cliff, and another to the beach, had about it, sheltering it securely with their protecting branches, several majestic magnolia and live-oak trees.

Behind the house was a small out-house in which were kept a pony and a cow, and over all pervaded an air of comfort hardly consistent with what might be expected of an unlucky and poor fisherman.

Back of the cottage was the dense forest, and to the eastward stretched the tree-fringed coast, grand, silent, gloomy with its festoons of Spanish moss, and only here and there broken by a lagoon, or bayou, which emptied its dark, sluggish waters into the Gulf.

To the westward, after a league of dark forest extending from the point, the view was far different, for upon the sloping shores, two leagues distant, was a lordly plantation home known as The Everglades, and the home of wealth and refinement.

Velvet lawns, dotted with the beautiful live-oaks of that region, ran to the water's edge, in front of the mansion, while upon either side were flower-gardens, the fragrance from which pervaded the air far around them.

Back of the villa, in the distance, was the negro village, or quarter, and behind it, and on either side, the spreading fields, with the background of the picture filled up with the dark, shadowy, gloomy, interminable forest of magnolia, live-oak and cypress trees, all draped with the funereal moss so common in the far Southern latitude, and which dresses even the largest trees with robes and veils of somber gray.

Beyond The Everglades, as this, the home of the Mortimers, was called, was another lordly estate, which, bordering the shore for miles, was called Lakelands.

Here too, from the far-away point upon which stood Juan Gito's cabin home, could be seen a handsome villa of white stucco, with

ornamental grounds, gardens and parks surrounding it, and the negro quarter far away in the rear, their white cabins nightly relieved against the dark green of the forest.

In the harbors before each of these handsome estates, the houses of wealth and good blood, but not of happiness, were little fleets, from the handsome yacht of thirty tons to the cat-rig sail-boat and gayly painted surf-skiff.

Beyond Lakelands and The Everglades were other plantation houses, though none of the same grandeur, for no one else on the coast had the same wealth as had the Wyndhams and the Mortimers.

And it is of the occupants of these three homes by the sea, their loves and their hates, their joys and their sorrows, that my pen has to write its romance, kind reader, a romance it is true, but founded upon a reality so stern, that many in the far-away Southland will recall old, old stories, told them by their kindred who have passed away, and know that I have but drawn a pen-picture of an o'er true tale.

CHAPTER II.

A TRAGEDY AT THE EVERGLADES.

A SHOT rung through the elegant mansion of The Everglades, a death-cry followed it, a heavy fall shook the house, and a man stood above a dead body, while a white-faced maiden and trembling slaves rushed into the elegant library where the tragedy had occurred, and gazed in horror upon the one whose hand, still holding the pistol, had sent a soul into eternity.

Out from the room, with stern white face, strode the master of The Everglades, who had fired the death-shot, and away from his path shrunk the frightened slaves; but he was silently followed by the maiden who had arrived upon the scene to find that the roof that had sheltered her from infancy, had been shamed by a murder beneath it.

Striding up the broad stairway, the man turned into a large and luxuriously-furnished room, quietly and silently followed by the maiden, who closed the door behind her, while she cried in angry tones, mingled with reproach:

"Brother! Mark, what have you been guilty of?"

He turned upon her with livid face and glaring eyes, and answered:

"I have killed one who well deserved his fate."

That the two were brother and sister, a glance would show, for they were strangely alike in face and feature.

The man was young, hardly more than twenty-one, yet looking older, for dissipation marked his otherwise handsome face, and an ungoverned temper showed itself upon brow and mouth, while upon the latter rested a look that was sinister and treacherous.

Still his face was very handsome, and with his tall, graceful form, he was one to win the admiration of all who could not look through his eyes, the windows of his soul, into his heart, and read there its blackness.

The maiden was not sixteen, yet she too appeared several years older, as her superb form was well matured, and her face was full of calm dignity that softened in its extreme beauty.

She was dressed in exquisite taste, and the folds of her gauzy dress clung about her as gracefully as vailing about a statue.

Now her face was stern, reproachful and horrified at the act of her brother, and in answer to his words she said firmly:

"No one is so vile, Mark Mortimer, as to be sent into eternity without an instant's warning."

"He would have slain me had I not killed him," he answered in an angry tone.

"No, Mark, for I saw all as I sat upon the piazza."

He started at this, and gazed in an almost frightened way into her eyes, while she continued:

"What wrong was done, you are the guilty one."

"Your words I did not hear; but I saw enough to make me feel that poor Juan Gito was not the aggressor, and yet his has been the punishment."

"Mark! brother, you are of late getting fearfully entangled in a net, and I warn you to pause and think ere you go further in your career of wrong."

"For Heaven's sake, Mabel, hush this clatter."

"I am my own master, and shall do as I please, and as Juan Gito attacked me I shot him, and there it ends."

"But, as you seem to wish to make trouble out of it, by reporting differently, I shall sail for New Orleans at once, and write a letter to the authorities of what I have done, for the man is a pirate, came here to get me to buy a diamond which he had robbed me of, in some way, and when I recognized it, and would have claimed my own, he sought to kill me."

"That is all there is of it, and as there were no witnesses—"

"I saw it, Mark."

"No, you did not, and I would not advise you to say so."

"I am not to be intimidated," she said, firmly.

"Then you would wish to report differently from what I do, cause my story to be suspected, and get me tried before a jury of the poor trash living inland, and who do not like me, and have my life end on a gallows."

"No, no, Mark, I would not do that."

"Then let the matter rest, and my story of no witnesses will be believed."

"My course shall be determined wholly upon what questions are asked me," was the cold reply.

"So be it. I shall be off to view matters from afar."

"Farewell, Mabel, and when next we meet may you have more love for your brother than now you have," he said, with a sneer.

"The acts of evil which my brother has committed have caused him to forfeit my respect, and without respect I cannot love, no matter how deep a feeling I may have for you, because the same blood flows in our veins, because together we were children, loving each other, trusting each other then, and not as now estranged by your actions."

"Good-by, brother, and may the Holy Mother guide and protect you."

She glided from the room as she spoke, and he summoned his valet, Duke, a tall, powerfully-formed mulatto, with a distinguished air, and bold, resolute face that showed he fretted under the yoke of slavery in which he was held.

CHAPTER III.

MASTER OR MISTRESS.

THE Mortimers were a proud, haughty race, with tempers that had cast many a shadow upon their lives for generations past.

All that remained of the name, at the time of which I write, was the wild, reckless youth, whose hand took the life of Juan Gito, and his lovely sister, Mabel; their father, Major Mortimer, having been killed in a duel vendetta some time before, it was said, by young Percy Wyndham of Lakelands, whose father had afterward been slain in a hostile meeting, fought from the decks of their respective yachts, by none other than young Mark Mortimer himself.

Rumor had it that Percy Wyndham would avenge his father's death and his mother's madness, for it was said the blow had driven her mad, by calling out Mark Mortimer; but months had passed and he had not done so, and rumor seemed at fault, until the gossip went round that there was a reason for the burying of the hatchet, as the young master of Lakelands had twice saved the life of the lovely mistress of The Everglades, Mabel Mortimer. Once from men who would have kidnapped her, and again, when she had drifted to sea in an open boat.

But, be this as it may, it was certain that the pathway made long years before, when the fathers of those of whom I write were boys and friends, remained still weed-grown, and the gulf between The Everglades and Lakelands still remained open.

Strange stories went floating around of both elegant homes; but in grim silence to the outer world the Mortimers and Wyndhams lived until Juan Gito, the Lagoon Fisherman, had gone to The Everglades and met his death at the hands of its haughty young master.

Realizing that his act was one he wished not to be too closely investigated, with his sister to tell the whole truth, Mark Mortimer had ordered his yacht to at once sail for New Orleans, the scene of his wildest orgies, and Duke, the former confidential slave of his father, he intended should accompany him.

"By Heaven!" he muttered, after the departure of his sister from the room.

"But matters are complicated about me

just now, and I shall have to ponder seriously on my run over what it is best for me to do.

"Juan Gito's tongue is silenced, thank Heaven, so that Mabel is the only one who can tell ugly tales, and she is too proud of her name to wish to see one who bears it behind prison bars; yes, and perhaps worse."

"As for Bess Gito, and the Wyndhams, they will keep silent I think, on that forced marriage of mine; but anyway, there are tongues to be stilled if I wish to prosper, and I shall decide what is best for me and act at once."

"Well, Duke!"

The mulatto before spoken of here entered the room and reported that the yacht was all ready to sail.

"And the corpse?" asked Mark Mortimer, with a sneer.

"Lies in the library, sir, where you killed—where it fell, I mean, sir."

"All right, Duke."

"Now pick up my traps and follow me and we'll be off."

"Mistis says I am not to go, sir."

"Who?"

"Mistis Mabel, sir."

"She says you are not to go?" asked Mark Mortimer, with an angry flush.

"Yes, master."

"We shall see about that."

"Up with my traps and follow me!"

He strode haughtily from his rooms, descended the stairs, and followed by Duke, bearing his baggage, was crossing the ground hallway toward the front door, when suddenly the library door flew open, and his sister Mabel confronted him.

"Ah! Mabel you startled me, dressed in white as you are," he said, with some nervousness.

"Doubtless, when I come, too, from the room where lies your victim," she answered coldly.

"No more of that, if you wish to part friends with me, Mabel," he said, angrily.

"If we are not friends, as well as kindred, Mark, it is your fault and not mine."

"Well, we'll not discuss that now, for I must be off."

"Tell the officers of the law, whom you had better send for at once, that Juan Gito gained access to my library and made an attack upon me, and I killed him, while, having important business calling me to New Orleans, I could not remain."

"I shall tell the officers of the law that which is best, Mark, and, for your own sake I think it is better for you to remain away until a change has come over you."

"Good-by!"

She held forth her hand, and stooping he quickly touched her forehead with his lips, and without a word more turned to depart, when Mabel said:

"Duke, when you have carried Master Mark's baggage on board return to the mansion, for I shall need you."

"Duke goes with me, Mabel," quickly said her brother.

"No, he remains here."

"I shall take him with me," was the stern reply.

"You will do no such thing, sir, for he is my slave, and I command him to remain."

"Your slave?" hissed Mark.

"Yes; for allow me to remind you that your inheritance you have squandered, and that The Everglades and its slaves are mine by my father's will."

"The crew of your yacht I allow you to take with you, but Duke remains here."

"By Heaven! I will not be brow-beaten, Mabel, even by you, and Duke goes with me, for I need him."

"Duke, call Ephraim here," commanded Mabel.

Duke silently put down the luggage and departed upon his errand, returning in an instant with the negro named.

"Ephraim, carry Master Mark's baggage to his yacht."

"Duke, go into the library and watch by that dead fisherman until further orders."

"A pleasant voyage to you, brother," and Mabel turned away.

"Curses! Mabel, I will not put up with this!" cried Mark Mortimer, in a fury.

She turned calmly toward him again, and said, in a voice he could not mistake:

"Mark, you are not master here, but I am mistress, and my orders shall be obeyed, if I

have to go to measures you and I will regret our lives long."

With a bitter curse, he turned and left the hallway, followed by Ephraim, while Duke obeyed the orders given him in silence, and entered the library, where lay the dead body of Juan Gito.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TIDINGS REACH LAKELANDS.

THE sun had not yet melted the dew-drops on leaf and flower, and rose-bush hedge and tree seemed covered with gems of rare beauty, as the rays of light fell upon the tiny drops of water, while the balmy breeze coming in from the Gulf, the singing of the mocking-bird, and gentle murmur of the waves upon the beach, made up a scene of rare beauty; which Percy Wyndham seemed to drink in with intense delight, as he strolled forth upon the wide piazza of Lakelands, and cast his eyes around him.

It was the morning after the tragedy at The Everglades, and under the shadows of the night Percy Wyndham's yacht, the Jack-o'-lantern, had glided into the plantation harbor, just as the Glide, the vessel of Mark Mortimer, was spreading its white wings to fly away toward New Orleans, carrying from the scene of his crime the reckless young planter whose pathway was leading him down life's scale instead of upward.

On board of the Jack-o'-lantern, when she ran into the Lakelands harbor, were Percy Wyndham, his mother and Bessie Gito, and the circumstances which brought those three together the story will reveal.

As Percy Wyndham stood there on the piazza, that lovely morning, his head unsheltered by a hat, he looked every inch a man, though his face in repose was boyish, nay womanly in its beauty; but there was that in eye and mouth to denote courage, resolution and manhood above his years, while his form, robed in a suit of white linen, was elegant, athletic and wiry.

"Well Uncle Toby, what brings you along at such a lively pace?" he called out to an old negro of most respectable appearance and dignified bearing, who was coming up the gravel path leading to the harbor, where were at anchor the Jack-o'-lantern, a beautiful sloop yacht, and several other little pleasure crafts.

"Master, I forgets my age, sah, when I have news to tell you such as I bring," responded the old negro earnestly.

Seeing that Uncle Toby really had something important to communicate, for he had seldom seen him so excited, Percy Wyndham said:

"Come into the library, Uncle Toby, and let me know what you have to say."

"No, master, for Mistis and Missy Bessie might hear me then, sah, and I don't want to be the one to give the poor young lady grief."

"Speak out then, Toby, and tell me what has happened."

"Well, sah, Mr. Mark Mortimer has kilt Juan Gito, the Cliff fisherman."

"Good God!"

"It is true, sah."

"Mark Mortimer has killed Juan Gito, you say?" cried Percy in a suppressed whisper.

"Yes, sah."

"When and where?"

"Last night, sah, at The Everglades?"

"Toby, how know you this?" sternly demanded Percy.

"Ephraim, told me, sah, not long ago, for you know, we is kinfolks, sah, Ephraim and me, and altho' our masters don't speak, we hain't had no falling out."

"Yes, yes; but tell me what Ephraim told you?"

"He said the fisherman came to The Everglades last night, went into the library where Master Mark was, and sprung on him with a knife, sah, to rob him."

"It is false! for that was not the reason Juan Gito attacked him; but go on, Toby, with your story."

"Well, sah, Ephraim says Master Mark shot the Cliff fisherman, and then set sail for New Orleans, telling Missy Mabel to report it to the officers at the village."

"Coward! to fly and let his poor sister stand the brunt of his act."

"Ah! Toby, these are troublous times, and they grow worse instead of better."

"But where is the body of Gito now?"

"Ephraim says Miss Mabel had it laid out decent in the library, until she could send it to the home on the cliff."

Percy Wyndham was silent a moment, and

then he said, as though he had decided upon what course he would pursue:

"Toby, order my barge and crew to be in readiness, and then return here."

"Now, I must go and break this fearful news to poor Bessie."

He turned and entered the mansion, while old Uncle Toby set forth on his errand, and suddenly the sunlight, the dew-drops, the singing-birds and balmy flower-scented breeze seemed but a mockery to Percy Wyndham, when he felt how somber the shadow that must fall upon poor Bessie, whose sunny skies had already been clouded with gloom, from past acts of the man who had taken the life of her father.

CHAPTER V.

BESSIE GITO'S OATH.

THE dining-room of Lakelands was light and cheery at all times, and seemed doubly so the morning of which I write, for, within it sat two persons, still lingering over the breakfast, having dismissed the table attendants to enjoy a chat together.

One of the two was a woman of stately presence, handsome, just passing the meridian of life, yet strangely sad looking.

Her face was pale, her eyes lustrous, and yet in their depths, and about her lovely mouth, dwelt a look of touching sadness, in which an expression of bitterness seemed often to creep.

She was dressed in a deep black and morning robe, and reclined at ease in her arm-chair at the table, one of her small hands toying the while with the silver coffee urn.

This was the widow of Captain Percy Wyndham, whom Mark Mortimer had slain, and the mother of the son who bore his father's name, and with whom the reader has already been made acquainted.

Rumor had it that she had seen Major Mark Mortimer, an old lover of hers, fall before the death-shot of her son, and the blow had unseated her reason, which had wholly fled from her when, shortly after, her husband had been another victim of the cruel Mortimer-Wyndham vendetta.

But now, as she sat there at the breakfast table, there seemed no wildness in her eye, though it was said that her son had, for long weeks, kept her a prisoner in her rooms.

Upon her right sat a young girl of rare beauty, and with a face fearless enough to have been that of a man.

Still it was a proud, beautiful face, at times soft and tender to sadness, and again lighting up with a fire that was reflected from every feature, to again change into a look that was hard and cold.

She was dressed in pure white, a favorite style of dress with ladies of the South at that day, and in fact to-day, and wore no ornament or jewelry, other than a massive plain gold ring upon her "wedding finger."

"Do you know, Mrs. Mortimer—"

"No, no, no, Mrs. Wyndham, do not call me by that name," quickly interrupted the young girl, as Mrs. Wyndham broke a silence of some moments between them.

"It is your name now, my child," answered Mrs. Wyndham.

"Legally, yes, thanks to your noble son, who forced Mark Mortimer to make good his mock marriage with me; but, as utterly as I discard him, so utterly do I discard his name forever," she answered almost fiercely.

"Well, Bessie, forgive me, as I will not err again; but I thought, that as some may have known that Mr. Mortimer was your lover, it was best that you claim, for your own sake, the name you now have a right to."

"No, I do not fear any one discovering the fact of either the mock or real marriage, other than those who know; but should they, I can readily prove my right to the name of Mortimer, which I scorn."

"I hope, now that Mr. Mortimer has made you his wife, even though forced to do so by my son, that it will prevent your father taking any steps against him, Bessie, for we have had enough of sorrow and death along our coast of late," sadly said the mistress of Lakelands.

"Indeed we have, my dear Mrs. Wyndham, and I feel that my father will let the dead past bury its dead, and be content to let affairs rest as they are, though I felt he had intended to avenge the wrong done me by Mr. Mortimer."

"I hope my father has not returned to our home and found me absent, for I wish to be there to welcome him, and tell him all that you

and your noble son have done for me," and the eyes of Bessie Gito filled with tears.

"Percy is a noble boy, Bessie, and I hope happiness may some day come to him in life, for he deserves other than that his days shall be passed with the shadow now hanging over him; but here he comes."

As Mrs. Wyndham ceased speaking, Percy Wyndham entered the room, pale and anxious-looking.

A quarter of an hour before he had left the breakfast-room and gone forth upon the piazza, to be shocked by the terrible story told him by Uncle Toby.

Now he returned to that room to break the tidings to Bessie Gito that her father had been slain by her husband, whose name she had utterly discarded forever.

Mrs. Wyndham saw at a glance that something had gone wrong with her son, and asked quickly:

"Well, Percy, what new trouble has come upon us, for your face tells me you have something of importance to communicate?"

"Alas! mother, I am the bearer of news of ill-omen," he said, with a glance of sympathy toward Bessie.

His mother and Bessie both saw the look, and the latter sprung to her feet with the words:

"My father?"

"Yes, Bessie, it is of your father that I have come to tell you," he answered.

She leaned toward him pleadingly, her hands clasped tightly together, and cried in a voice full of pathos:

"Speak! tell me all, for I can bear it, even though my father be dead."

"My poor girl, your father is dead," said Percy Wyndham, earnestly.

"Dead! my father dead?"

"Yes, Bessie."

"Then I am alone, all alone in the world," she cried, in tones that went to the hearts of her hearers, while Mrs. Wyndham answered:

"No, no, Bessie, my poor, dear child, you are not alone, for this is your home now, and I will be your mother, and Percy as a brother to you."

She bowed her head, but could not speak for an instant; but with a mighty effort she controlled her emotion, and turned again to Percy, whom she felt had more to tell.

"Mr. Wyndham, how did my father die?" she asked, with strange calmness.

"Bessie, be brave, be strong, for it will nearly crush you to know," he said, in a voice that trembled in spite of his self-control.

"Tell me, for I am calm," she answered, and her mien did not belie her words now.

"He fell by the hand of the one who has so cruelly wronged you in the past, Bessie."

"Mark Mortimer?" she asked, in a voice that was painfully calm.

"Alas, yes."

"He went to The Everglades to see Mr. Mortimer, and there met his death."

She was like a statue now, and her face, white as marble, seemed as impassionless.

She drew herself up to her full height, and were it not for her burning eyes, she would have seemed like one dead, standing upright.

Mrs. Wyndham and her son were both alarmed about her, and sprung toward her.

But she motioned them away, and dropping upon her knees, raised her eyes and clasped hands toward heaven, while in deep, earnest tones she cried:

"God in heaven hear my vow that Mark Mortimer, for this act, shall die by my hand!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE TORNADO.

SEVERAL hours after the sad news was told to Bessie Gito, of her father's death by the hand of Mark Mortimer, a large launch was gliding along the shores, and heading for the little harbor of Cliff Cottage.

The launch was a trim-hulled boat, urged on by eight black oarsmen, in their white suits and straw hats, and in the stern, his hand resting upon the silver-mounted tiller, was Percy Wyndham.

Before him were two persons, one alive, the other dead.

The living one sat up in the bottom of the boat, and was Bessie Gito, bending over the cold, white face of her dead father, whose head rested on her lap.

The launch had stopped at The Everglades landing, and Percy Wyndham and four of his slaves had gone up to the handsome, but un-

happy home, and gotten the body of the murdered man.

It was the first time that Percy Wyndham had ever been to the home of his foes, and he glanced around him with some interest upon the beauty of the place.

He had been met by Mabel Mortimer, who gave him a quiet welcome, told him her heart bled for poor Bessie, and made known to him her brother's story of the death-scene in the library.

With the body, Percy returned to the launch, which at once got under way for Cliff Cottage.

Arriving in the little basin, where were quietly riding at anchor the fisherman's boats, the launch grounded upon the beach, and the slaves taking up the corpse, all proceeded to the little cabin.

Tenderly the dead form was laid out in the little sitting-room, and then Bessie turned to Percy, and grasped his hand, while she said earnestly:

"Oh, you have been so good to me; but now leave me with my dead."

"But, Bessie, it is not well for you to be here alone," he urged.

"I will be, for I must be alone with my dead."

"Return to Lakelands, and this evening, at sunset, come back with your mother, and we will lay father away in his grave, and then I will go with you to your home, as your good mother says I must."

"And I say so too, Bessie."

"Well, I will go, and I will be your sister, Percy; but now leave me."

"But my men can some of them remain to dig a grave."

"No, I must be all alone, and the grave can be dug when they return this evening."

Percy still urged, but Bessie was obdurate, and at last he yielded and returned with his negroes to the launch, leaving the poor girl alone with her dead father.

As the launch returned to Lakelands, one of the oarsmen said:

"Massa, dere am a storm comin' up astarn ob us, sah."

Percy turned quickly, and saw that volumes of black clouds were rising in the east, and rapidly spreading over the breakers.

"That looks bad, boys, and I have a mind to return to the cottage at once, for that storm will last all day," he said, and at once, as having decided on his course, he put about.

But he saw that he was too late, and that the blow would strike him before he could reach the cliff basin, and he held on rapidly toward the Lakelands harbor, the negro oarsmen working with terrific energy, for they well knew their danger.

From her window at The Everglades Mabel Mortimer saw the launch far out upon the waters, and realized its danger.

That it could not reach the Lakelands harbor she well knew, before the gale, or rather tornado, burst upon the waters, for that was nearly a league away.

That Percy Wyndham could run into The Everglades harbor, only half a mile from him, she was well aware; but would he save himself by coming upon the shore of his foes?

He had come to The Everglades for the body of Juan Gito, it was true; but that was in the discharge of a sacred duty toward Bessie; but she doubted if he would seek the harbor again, even though the lives of his crew and himself were at stake.

She had watched the course of the launch, with its ghastly freight, all the way up the coast, until it rounded the cliff point, and then saw it returning, after, as she had believed, the burial of the fisherman.

She saw by her glass that Bessie was not in the launch, and wondered that Percy Wyndham should have left her alone in her grief.

Then she beheld the rising tornado, and anxiously watched the progress of the returning boat.

Mabel had lived so long upon the water, that she had become a thorough seawoman, and could manage a boat with a skill that had often won her father's praise, while she was expert in reading the signs of the storms, and knew well that the launch could only escape by a miracle, when the storm struck it.

"Will he come into the harbor of The Everglades?" she asked herself aloud.

"Ah! he goes about—no, he again comes on—see! they know their danger, and how like giants that black crew pulls!" she cried.

"Yes, he bends this way; he will come into our harbor—no, he still stands on—there he seems to waver—Heaven spare him, for he holds on for the Lakelands, and will be lost."

She sprung to her feet as she spoke, darted from her room, bounded down the stairs, and called loudly:

"Duke! Ephraim! Pierre!"

Several slaves, at the head of whom was Duke, came quickly at her loud cry, while a mulattress, her maid, seemed terrified almost into hysterics.

"Peace, Fidele, and cease that clatter, for no harm has come to me."

"But you, Duke, follow me, and, Ephraim and Pierre, you come too."

She darted out of the front door as she spoke, and the wondering but obedient negroes followed her.

A wild scene met their gaze, for the clouds were black as ink half across the heavens, while the remaining half was cloudless, and the sun illumined the earth and waters to the westward.

But in the eastward a veil of inky hue was trailing from the skies and dragging over the waters with lightning speed, urging before it a wall of foam, and seemingly threatening all in its path with destruction.

"The tornado! the tornado!" shouted the negroes in chorus, while Fidele cried:

"Ah, Missy Mabelle,* look there!"

"I see him, girl, and it is to save him I go," answered Mabel, bounding down toward the little harbor.

The object that had caught the eye of Fidele was the launch, just ahead of the tempest-lashed waters, and holding on toward the Lakelands harbor, rather than seek safety in the haven of a foe.

As Mabel looked she saw the negro crew of the launch, in obedience to some order, suddenly press hard on their starboard oars, which, with the tiller, sent the bows of the boat round to face the tornado.

Then, with oars at a rest, they calmly waited the fierce blow that must fall upon them within a quarter of a minute.

"Here, Duke, into the life-boat; you, Ephraim, Pierre and Monk, and I will take the tiller," cried Mabel.

"But, mistis, you will be drowned," cried Duke.

"Silence, sir, and obey," was the stern order.

Duke looked as though he would rebel, while through his shut teeth came the hissed words:

"Let him die, as he deserves, and then the vendetta will end."

"Did you hear me, Duke?"

"Yes, mistis, but I cannot let you risk your life."

"Coward! it is your life you think of and not mine," she said, fiercely.

His yellow face flushed, but he answered quickly, yet with respect:

"I am no coward, mistis, for I will go alone in the life-boat to the rescue, if you will stay here."

"I will not trust you, for I know how you regard Mr. Wyndham."

"Into that boat, Duke, or I will have you put in irons."

He obeyed in silence, the other negroes took up their oars also and Mabel sprung to her place at the tiller, while Fidele, true to her name, followed her and crouched down in the bottom of the life-boat, just as the launch was seen to rise on the wall of foam and then sink from sight in the mad waters.

"Give way, boys!" shouted Mabel, and the life-boat shot off from the shore like an arrow to the rescue.

CHAPTER VII.

TO THE RESCUE.

THE Lakelands launch was a long, broad, roomy boat, generally used by the family for a row upon the waters, when there was not wind sufficient for a good sail, but it was by no means a staunch built craft, and would not have been taken by Percy Wyndham, to carry the body of Juan Gito home, had he felt any dread of a coming storm.

When he departed, the skies were clear; but in the Gulf latitude storms are wont to rise with lightning rapidity, and thus it was that Percy had been caught in the gale with a boat he could not depend upon.

* Fidele was a French quadroon, and gave the French accent to the name of Mabel.

He was well aware that he could seek safety by running into the haven of The Everglades; but his pride would not allow him to do this, and he preferred to take the chances, though his conscience told him he had no right to risk the lives of those under him.

In regard to the life-boat of The Everglades, it was a far different craft than the launch, being built especially for rough waters.

Long, narrow, deep in the water, it was yet light enough to be handled easily by four oarsmen, and Mabel felt that she could not do otherwise than risk much to save one who had taken his life in his hand to rescue her from peril, as Percy Wyndham had done in the past.

Duke's brow was dark, at being forced to rescue one who had shot him down, and nearly caused his death, when he sought to avenge his master, for he did not reason that he had attacked Percy, only that he owed to him a wound that had cost him long weeks of bitter anguish, both of body and mind.

Had he gone without Mabel to the rescue, never would he have saved Percy Wyndham, if in his power to do so, and he felt angry that it had not been in his power to let him drown.

But Duke knew the Mortimers well, and that Mabel was no exception to her race, and did he dare go against her will that he would be the sufferer, so he yielded, at first with a bad grace, and then, as though wishing to regain favor in the eyes of his young mistress, he devoted every energy to the work, cheering his black comrades on with voice and example.

Fortunately every negro at The Everglades plantation were good boatmen, and the four rowed together as though they were a trained crew, and sent the life-boat flying over the waters.

Fortunately the tornado struck the life-boat while still under the lee of the little point of land, which formed the harbor.

Mabel met it well, and called to the oarsmen to steady the craft, which was tossed about like a chip in a mill-race for an instant.

Then it rode like a cork over the rough waters, and the strong, sinewy arms of its crew sent it forward into the very teeth of the gale.

Out of the harbor, over the white waters went the gallant craft, Mabel holding her head to the gale with firm hand, while Fidele crouched at the feet of her mistress muttering prayers to all the saints in the calendar, for the quadroon was a good Catholic.

Across the storm-swept waves Mabel kept her eyes, and soon an exclamation broke from her, for she caught sight of the launch.

It was bottom up, and two persons were clinging to it.

One glance, through the mist of spray showed her that they were black faces.

But, as she looked she saw a hand stretched up from the waves and seize the boat, and the next instant a white face rose above the waters, and then she knew that it was Percy Wyndham.

But he did not remain clinging to the boat, but raised to a place of comparative safety the form of a negro man, who clutched wildly at the keel, while his brave preserver returned again for one more of his unfortunate crew.

"Noble man," cried Mabel, lost in admiration at the brave deed. "To save others at such a moment."

But, as she looked, a fiercer gust of wind, and a more savage wave, together seized the upturned launch, and wrenched it in two pieces.

The cracking of the timbers was plainly heard by those in the life-boat, and realizing that the last stay of hope had gone from Percy Wyndham and his crew, Mabel urged her own oarsmen on with voice and gesture, and seconded by the entreaty of Fidele and cheering voice of Duke, they all bent to their work with terrific energy.

On, on, through the wild waters went the life-boat, until soon a head was seen in the waves ahead.

It was a black face in the midst of snowy foam, and knowing well that the aim of his mistress was Percy Wyndham, Duke looked toward her anxiously.

"Save him, Duke!" was her command, and dropping his oar, as the life-boat went by Duke seized the negro and dragged him over the high gunwale.

Then another, and another followed, until five of the eight negro oarsmen had been

saved, but not yet was Percy Wyndham visible.

"Life-boat ahoy!"

The cry came from the wild waters, clear, calm, and with no tremor in the tones.

Looking in the direction from whence came the voice, and off the starboard quarter, Mabel beheld Percy Wyndham rise on a wave, and saw that he was upholding in his arms one of his slaves.

Instantly the life-boat was put away toward him, and Duke put forth his strong arm to aid Percy, who said sternly:

"Take him in, for I need not your aid."

Duke silently obeyed, dragging the negro over the gunwale with considerable effort, for he was unconscious.

Then he turned again to help Percy, who, refusing his aid, nimbly drew himself on board, while he said politely:

"Miss Mortimer, I owe you my life, and the lives of six of my crew; but there are two yet missing, I see."

"Then we must save them," firmly said Mabel.

"If we have time; but see, this tornado is growing in fury, and you must not risk your precious life more."

"Hail there is the stern half of the launch, and one of my men is clinging to it."

"Will you permit me to take the tiller?"

She silently released it to his grasp, and he held away for the wreck, but seeing that it was dangerous to go too near, called to the negro to let go and swim toward the life-boat.

But the negro was terrified, and with no confidence in himself in those wild waters, cried out:

"I dassn't do it, massa!"

Percy then remembered that he was one of the crew who could not swim, and whom he had himself taken to the up-turned boat, with two others, and instantly he sprung overboard and, with a few vigorous strokes, reached the wreck, seized the terrified negro and bore him to the life-boat, when Duke drew him up to safety.

A moment after Percy had again relieved Mabel at the helm, and confident that the remaining man of his crew had sunk, for he was nowhere visible, he put about and headed shoreward, just as the tornado increased in fury.

Then, as the heavily laden life-boat went toward the harbor of The Everglades, Mabel watched the cool helmsman, now he took every precaution, and skillfully met wave and wind, and saw that it would have been impossible for her to have carried the craft back in safety.

At last the harbor was reached, and the life-boat went ashore, and was dragged far out by the crew, while Percy Wyndham took Mabel in his arms and placed her upon dry land.

"Miss Mortimer, I can never forget that I owe you my life," he said, in a low, earnest tone, and motioning to his slaves to follow him, he walked quickly across the lawn and disappeared in the foliage of the garden on his way homeward, his faithful blacks at his heels, while Mabel slowly retraced her way toward the house, her heart and brain throbbing with commingled emotions, for she had saved the life of one to whom she was twice indebted for a like service.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MOTHER'S THREAT.

HASTILY did Percy Wyndham retrace his way homeward, as though most anxious to get his feet off of the soil that belonged to the Mortimers, and as he walked along his face was cold and stern with conflicting emotions that almost overpowered him, for almost would he rather have died than owe his life to one of the name of Mortimer, even though that one was the fair mistress of The Everglades, with a heart as pure as the white magnolia blossoms in the forest.

The route he took homeward led him around the flower gardens, and thence into the magnolia forest, where upon all sides was visible the fury of the winds, as strong trees had been uprooted, limbs torn off, and fences laid down.

At his heels, in Indian file, came the seven negroes, their faces gloomy with the thought that one of their number had been taken from them, to find a grove at the bottom of the sea.

Along the path leading to Magnolia Arbor,

long years before the meeting place of his father and Mabel's father when they were boys, and in after years the scene of the duel, in which Major Mortimer was wounded by Captain Wyndham, and again where the major lost his life in the fatal meeting with Mrs. Wyndham, and when, to shield his mother, the son had avowed himself the slayer of the master of The Everglades, Percy Wyndham wound his way, memory rushing upon him with overwhelming force as he reviewed the spot, and making him almost unmindful of the fierce storm that sent branches of trees falling about him, and turned the faces of his black comrades ashen with fear.

At last he breathed more freely, as he sprung over the nailed-up gate leading to Lakelands, and arriving at the mansion presented himself before his mother all dripping as he was.

"Percy, my son, what has happened?" cried Mrs. Wyndham, who had been gazing nervously out over the waters, and wondering if her son had been caught in the storm.

"The launch went down, mother, under the blow of the tornado, and, as you see, I have had a struggle for life in the waters," he answered calmly.

"Thank Heaven your life is spared, Percy," said the mother fondly.

"In that I was more fortunate than poor Leo, who sunk, though the rest of the crew were saved."

"Leo drowned?" said Mrs. Wyndham sadly.

"Yes, mother, for he could not swim, as you may remember."

"I took him to the upturned launch twice when the waters washed him off, but a savage wave broke the boat in two, and I saw him no more."

"Poor man; but the others who were with you?"

"Were saved, mother."

"The Virgin be praised for that."

"You had better give orders for the men to watch the shore for Leo's body."

"I will, mother," and Percy seeming distraught about something, which attracted his mother's attention, she said quickly:

"Surely that poor girl did not attempt to return with you, Percy?"

"No, she remained alone at the cottage with her dead father, for she would have it so."

"I intended remaining, as you know, to dig the grave and help Bessie pack up, and await your coming in the yacht this evening; but she would not listen to it, and it would have been rude of me to persist in staying."

"Poor child, we must hasten to her as soon as this blow dies out, for I cannot bear to leave her there alone; but, Percy, there is something else that troubles you?"

"Yes, mother."

"What is it, my son?"

"How do you think I escaped death, mother, when the launch was wrecked?"

"I had hardly thought of that, for I felt that you must have been near the shore."

"No, I was half a mile off shore, and in front of The Everglades mansion."

"Ah! then how did you escape, Percy, for it is strange that only poor Leo was lost under the circumstances?"

"Yes, and all might have been drowned, though I believe I could have reached the shore, had we not been rescued."

"A vessel was near to pick you up, then?"

"No, mother, but a life-boat was, and manned by a crew from The Everglades."

"Hail saved by a crew from that accursed house?" cried Mrs. Wyndham, with pale face and flashing eyes.

Percy made no immediate reply, and when he did, spoke in a low, calm voice:

"Mother, I could have saved the launch, for I was near enough to The Everglades harbor to run in, when I saw the storm coming; but I would rather risk my life than save it by landing on the soil that belonged to the Mortimers."

"You were right, my son."

"But there was one who saw the danger of the launch and at once came to its rescue."

"Did he know that it was a boat from Lakelands?"

"Yes, mother."

"He was doubtless some negro who is friendly with Toby."

"No, mother, it was Miss Mortimer."

The lady sprung to her feet as though stung by an adder, and her face became livid, while she hissed forth:

"Mabel Mortimer saved your life, Percy Wyndham?"

"Yes, mother, she came in the life-boat of The Everglades, with that insolent mulatto, Duke, three other oarsmen, and her quadroon maid, to our rescue, and, as I told you, saved all of us but poor Leo."

"That girl risked her life to save you?" again hissed Mrs. Wyndham.

"She did take a fearful risk to do so, mother," was the quiet reply.

Mrs. Wyndham paced to and fro for half a dozen turns, and then stopping full in front of her son, said, in a low, trembling voice:

"Percy, that girl's father betrayed the friendship of your father long years ago, and stole from him the woman of his love, her mother, who was fickle as the wind to believe and trust the traitor."

"When recovering from the wound your father gave him in the duel that followed, that girl's father, Major Mark Mortimer, was cruising in the Gulf to recuperate his shattered health, and came across a vessel in which was my father and myself in the power of lagoon pirates, and boldly rescued us from them."

"Alas! it had been better had I died then, for he won my first love, for I was a mere child then, treacherously led me to the altar, for he was then a married man, and afterward basely deserted me by a trick which led me to believe he was dead."

"Retaking my maiden name, at the request of my uncle, who became my guardian when my father died, I met abroad your father, and became, as I believed, his wife."

"Coming here, long years after, to his home to dwell, I heard who it was that was the master of The Everglades, and seeing him I recognized the man who had so basely betrayed me in my Mexican home."

"With that man living, I was not truly your father's wife, and hence I sought to revenge myself upon Major Mark Mortimer, and at the same time legalize my marriage with your father by the death of my bitter foe."

"Your father, through my Mexican attorney, coming here about my inheritance, there learned all, and sought to call Major Mark Mortimer to answer for his crime upon the dueling field."

"You know the result, how I sent your father to New Orleans on a false scent, made a rendezvous at Magnolia Arbor with Major Mortimer, and, with the aid of old Uncle Toby and my maid, Phoebe, forced him to fight me."

"To save me Phoebe gave him an unloaded weapon, and he fell dead before my aim, while I, discovering what my maid had done, was overcome and fainted, just as you came up, and at once told Mr. Massey and his son, who rode upon the scene, that you had shot Major Mortimer in a duel."

"Ah! Percy, you know that your poor father fell a few days after, at the hands of that man's son, and now you tell me that Mabel Mortimer, the daughter of the one I killed, the sister of the one who killed your father, has saved your life?"

"Yes, mother," was the quiet response.

She had worked herself into a passion, by the bitter memories that crowded upon her, and again turning upon him, cried:

"Percy, my son, dearly as I love you, I would rather have you dead this minute, than that your life should have been saved by a Mortimer."

"Mother, this is unreasonable, for twice have I, though I never spoke to you upon the subject, served Miss Mortimer well, once saving her from kidnapping, and once from death."

"Good God! is this true, Percy Wyndham?" almost shrieked the woman.

"It is, mother."

"Then this can lead but to one end, if I do not check it, for she is beautiful, and, they say, good and lovely, while you, Percy, can win any woman's love."

"But hear me, boy, and I make the threat in deadly earnest, if you ever look upon Mabel Mortimer with one glance of love, if ever you forget the graves that are open between you two, so help me high Heaven I will kill her with my own hand."

CHAPTER IX.

TWICE THWARTED.

AT the fiercely spoken words of his mother, Percy Wyndham sprang to his feet, his face

pale with anger, while he said in his deep, earnest tones:

"Mother, you allow your hatred to rule your reason for I am not one to seek to wed one whose name has brought sorrow, shame and misery upon us."

"You jump too quickly at conclusions, and I must beg that you do not attribute either to Miss Mortimer or myself thoughts and intentions our minds have never dwelt upon, and which our hearts could not for a moment tolerate."

"She was accursed with an evil father, whom she believes fell by my hand, and has a wicked brother who slew my father, and yet she is as pure of heart as she is beautiful in face and form, and thus, wishing to square the debt of gratitude she owed an enemy came to my rescue risking her own life to do so, and there the matter ends."

Mrs. Wyndham shook her head in an ominous way, but made no reply, and, as though utterly dismissing the matter, Percy continued:

"Now it is our duty to see what can be done for that poor girl, Bessie Gito."

"True, for my heart bleeds for her in her sorrow and loneliness."

"I ordered the plantation carpenters to make a coffin, and I shall take it out in my little yacht and make a landing at the cottage and bury Gito, but you, mother, had better not attempt the rough voyage, for it will be a hard thing to beat up the coast, in this tempest."

"I shall go with you, Percy," was the firm reply.

"Very well, mother, and I will order the yacht gotten ready, for we must return before night, if possible," and Percy called Uncle Toby, gave him his instructions, and then sought his room to change his wet clothing for dry.

Soon he reappeared in a storm-suit, and found his mother awaiting him, and warmly clad against the elements.

The tempest in the meantime seemed to steadily increase instead of blowing itself out, and the negro crew, assembled upon the yacht, shook their heads ominously.

But Percy was determined to make the start, the coffin for Juan Gito was carried on board, and soon after the graceful yacht, under close-reefed sails, headed out of the little harbor for open water.

It was, however, but a few minutes before Percy Wyndham, who was himself at the helm with a negro to aid him, saw that it would be madness to attempt to beat up the coast against the fearful gale then blowing, and while he could do so in safety, he put back, but with the greatest reluctance.

"Mother, I shall take a vehicle and try the lagoon roads," he said, as the yacht dropped anchor.

A light wagon was accordingly gotten ready to bear the coffin, and mounting his horse alone, for Mrs. Wyndham was urged not to make a second attempt, Percy set off by land to reach the cottage of Juan Gito.

But again was he thwarted, as the fierce winds had driven the lagoons beyond their banks, utterly overflowing the ridge road to the cliff, and once more he returned to Lakelands.

Determined not to be thwarted, Percy set men to work to fit up his large yacht, the Jack-o'-lantern, which had been dismantled; but this was no easy task, and night came on to find the work not completed.

Through the long hours of the night the mother and son sat in the library, waiting and praying for the savage winds to die away, and thinking of the lonely watcher with her dead in the little cliff cabin.

But daylight came, and still the tempest raged, and at last the Jack-o'-lantern being gotten in trim for sea, the mother and son boarded her, the coffin was taken on board, the anchor hauled up, and under close-reefed sails the gallant and stanch craft beat out of the little harbor into the rougher waters.

Her decks were swept by volumes of water, the gale forced her far over, until her bulwarks lay under, and in going about on her tacks, she staggered fearfully; but the strong hand on her wheel held her on her course in spite of every danger, for he was determined that poor Bessie Gito should no longer bear the fearful ordeal she was put to.

And watching the Jack-o'-lantern, pitching, reeling, bounding through the waters, was

Mabel Mortimer, from her window in The Everglades, and well she knew the mission undertaken by the daring young sailor, and prayed for his success.

She had seen his failure the afternoon before in the Glide, beheld him, with the glass, ride away from Lakelands with the coffin to try and reach the cottage by the lagoon roads, and all night long, having seen him return, twice thwarted, she had watched through the storm to see the Jack-o'-lantern set sail, for she had observed that he had put the crew to work to fit her for sea.

Now, as the yacht faced the fury of the storm and put to sea, Mabel Mortimer watched and prayed for the safety of those on board, and that they might reach the haven of their hopes.

CHAPTER X.

DESERTED.

THE Jack-o'-lantern was certainly a most stanch craft, and was equal to almost any emergency.

When a smuggler craft, she had met with many a fierce gale in flying about the Gulf, and when afterward the private yacht of Forrester, the Freebooter, a man who, though a pirate captain, had dwelt part of his time in New Orleans, none knowing that beneath the mask and title of gentlemen he was a buccaneer, the vessel had been admired by all who saw her, and was noted for her fleetness and stanchness.

When Percy Wyndham had captured the Skeleton Schooner, and though Forrester, the Freebooter, had escaped, had also gotten possession of the Jack-o'-lantern, he kept the latter for his own use, turning the schooner over to the Government.

Now, when he set sail with his mother and the black crew of the yacht, to run up the coast to the home of the dead fisherman, Percy soon realized that the Jack-o'-lantern had all she could do to weather the savage tempest, which still kept up with unabated fury.

But he knew the boat, was confident in his own skill and nerve, had held perfect confidence in his negro crew, so kept on in the very teeth of the tornado.

At last the white cabin of Juan Gito was sighted in the distance, and the yacht was run into the little harbor near the humble but pretty house.

Luffing up sharp, the anchors were let fall, the sails lowered and furled, and the yacht lay rocking upon the swell that drove into the basin.

"Mother, the gale is blowing itself to death, and in a few hours it will be over, so that you can go ashore; but now I will go to the cabin," said Percy.

"But, my son, it is dangerous to lower a boat even in this harbor," answered Mrs. Wyndham.

"I shall not risk the lowering of a boat until the sea has run down, mother; but as every minute must be an age to poor Bessie, alone with the corpse of her dead father, I will spring overboard and swim ashore."

"It is a great risk, Percy; but you are a superb swimmer."

"There is little risk for me, mother, and I deem it my duty to relieve the mind of that poor girl by letting her feel that she is not deserted, for she has evidently not seen the approach of the Lantern."

"So I think, as the door remains closed."

Percy threw aside his storm-coat, and the next instant bounded into the wild waters, and struck boldly out for the shore.

He was a powerful swimmer, and urged himself through the foaming waves, and soon went flying on the crest of a huge wave far out upon the sandy beach.

He turned and waved his hat to his mother, who stood on the yacht's deck anxiously watching him, and the sable crew broke forth in a ringing cheer at the daring and success of their young master.

But the voices floating up to the cabin, brought not Bessie Gito to the door, and with a misgiving at his heart, for fear that some evil had befallen the young girl, or in her anguish she had taken her life, Percy hastened his steps.

As he went away he upbraided himself for having left her, and not remained, in spite of her wish for him not to do so.

Approaching the cabin he found all desolate and silent.

The winds had wrenched off branches of the trees here and there, the flowers had been blown down, and upon all rested an air of loneliness.

Knocking at the door he received no answer, and when thrice no response had come to his blows on the stout oak boards, he raised the latch and entered.

To his surprise he beheld not the body of Juan Gito laid out before him, nor did he see Bessie.

The room looked as it had when he left it, excepting that the corpse and the maiden were not to be seen.

"Bessie!"

He called her name in hushed tones, and yet no answer came.

"Bessie!"

He called again and louder, yet still no answer to his call. Instantly he crossed the little sitting-room, and entered what was the dining-room and kitchen.

But it too was silent and deserted.

Then he went into the bedroom that had been Juan Gito's. It was tenantless.

Before entering the room he knew to be Bessie's, his delicacy caused him to stop and knock.

But no answer came and he entered the room.

It too was vacant.

A pleasant, cosy retreat it was, with snowy curtains over the windows, pretty pieces of furniture, sketches and paintings on the wall, executed by Bessie herself, a study table and desk, a comfortable bed, with its embroidered spread, a guitar, and other things that denoted a refined taste.

But the fair young occupant was not there.

The room, like the rest of the house, was deserted.

In surprise Percy Wyndham left the cottage by the rear door, and gazed around him.

Back, under the shelter of a large magnolia, his eyes fell upon a newly-made grave.

Quickly he walked toward it, and felt assured that within that grave lay all that was mortal of Juan Gito; but there was another grave, and it was yawning wide open, while into the bark of the tree he saw most skillfully cut the name of Juan Gito, the date of his death and age, and following was the line:

"Yet to be avenged."

These few words told the story of the daughters' grief and revengeful feeling, and at once it came to the mind of Percy Wyndham that poor Bessie, maddened by her loss, had gone to New Orleans to seek out Mark Mortimer.

That accounted for her absence, he thought, and the desertion of the cottage.

But then, how could she have gone?

The gale that had kept him away from Cliff Cottage, certainly would have prevented her leaving it.

Besides, he had seen the fisherman's life-boat and other little vessels in the basin as he came in, and the approach by land to the cabin, his own experience told him, was wholly cut off.

She must therefore have concealed herself somewhere about the cabin.

Retracing his way, he again entered the house and began his search.

But nowhere could he find trace of the missing girl, and he was in a quandary.

Then it flashed upon him:

"How could that young girl dig a grave, and unaided, bury her father?"

Here was another mystery, and going back to the forest, he searched every part of it, looked into the little stable and poultry-yard, and foiled in his hope of finding Bessie, went back into the cabin and threw himself into Juan Gito's easy-chair to think.

Hardly had he done so, when his eye fell upon a piece of paper, which the wind, when he opened the door, had evidently blown from the table.

Quickly he seized it, and in Bessie's bold hand saw written:

"I bury my dead in the sea he loved so well, and to-day go forth to wreak revenge upon the one who brought a curse upon my life, and who made me fatherless and alone in the world.

"For what revenge may drive me to, may God pity and forgive me."

BESSIE GITO."

Percy Wyndham stood like one in a trance, more in a quandary than ever, for the note said Juan Gito was buried in the sea, and yet a newly made grave, in which he was supposed to rest, was back among the magnolias, and beside it an open grave.

What did all this mean?

As his eyes roved mechanically about the room, they lighted upon another piece of paper, and quickly he seized this too.

It was written in the same hand as the other, and addressed to himself.

It read:

"KIND FRIEND:

"I have buried my father in the forest, and not in the sea, as I had intended.

"By his side is an open grave, which one day shall be the resting place of Mark Mortimer, whom I now go forth to find, for I have a debt of revenge to pay.

"Forgive me for being led by my revengeful passions, instead of the kind sympathy and advice of your noble self and good mother; but my nature is to strike back, and having been cruelly wronged, I can know no rest until Mark Mortimer is placed in the grave by the side of my poor murdered father.

"Circumstances I little dreamed of, place it in my power to leave my home on the path I have chosen to follow, and my little home and its contents I will to you and your mother, humble though they may be, and they may serve to cause you to remember me as I was, and not as I will be.

"The Virgin bless you and yours, will be ever the prayer of your unhappy and unfortunate friend,

"BESSIE GITO."

Thrusting the two letters hastily into his breast pocket, Percy Wyndham left the cabin, and walked quickly down to the beach.

The waves still rushed in furiously, and fell with thunder tones upon the shore; but fearlessly he bounded through them, and, after a hard and desperate swim reached the yacht and sprang on board, while his mother followed him anxiously into the cabin, to know what news of ill-omen he was the bearer of.

CHAPTER XI.

ALONE WITH THE DEAD.

I WILL now return to Bessie Gito, who, the reader will remember, insisted upon being left alone with her dead father, and was so urgent in her demand that Percy Wyndham felt it would be rudeness to refuse her, and consequently departed in his launch with his negro crew.

After his departure, Bessie stepped to the window, and watched the launch disappear from the basin, when she knew that she was indeed alone.

Before, when with her father at the cabin, not an atom of loneliness had she ever felt, and in fact, when he was absent, she had her pany, her guitar, books, sketching and needle-work to employ her leisure, and prevent her from feeling how thoroughly was she shut off from the rest of the world.

Yet now how different, for though her father was with her, his cold upturned face looked not upon her, and no word of love and kindness came from the silent lips.

With a wail of anguish as these thoughts rushed upon her, she threw herself down by the body and wept bitter tears of sorrow.

Long she remained thus, to suddenly spring to her feet, as a loud rap was heard upon the closed door.

Had she been so long writhing in bitter agony over the body of her father that Percy Wyndham had returned to Lakelands, and, as he had promised, returned with his mother—and the coffin for her dead father?

The thought made her shudder and involuntarily clasp the cold hand, as though to keep it from the cold grave.

True, she had lived over and over again her life while crouching there on the floor beside her dead.

She had gone back in memory to her childhood, when she knew a mother's fair face and form, and had seen her laid away in the tomb.

The years that followed, with her father only to love, had come to her, and she remembered how happy she had been in learning to row and sail a boat.

Then her school-girl life at the convent came up before her, and last her return to her cabin home she loved so well, to one day being in danger of a fearful death in the lagoon, when a huge alligator would have torn her to pieces had it not been for her timely rescue by a stranger whom she learned to love, for he fascinated her, and found to be none other than Mark Mortimer, of The Everglades.

The memory of his mock marriage with her then came up, and then, when she knew his baseness how her cause had been espoused by Percy Wyndham, in return for her piloting him to the Black Lagoon, where lay hidden the Skeleton Schooner.

Percy Wyndham, at the sword's point, had forced Mark Mortimer to right that wrong done her, and saddened by the memory of her having loved a false, base man, and the discovery that her father was really in league with

Forrester, the Freebooter, she had returned to her home to pine over the past, as she had expected; but instead found her father slain by the hand of the one she had once loved.

Such were the memories that had trooped up before Bessie Gito as she bent over the corpse of her murdered father, and a cry escaped her lips, and to her feet she sprung with alarm at the knock on the cabin door, for it recalled her from bitter dreamland to a realization equally bitter.

Like one caught in guilt she stood, bending half over the dead, and clutching convulsively the ice-cold hands, seemingly without power to ask who was without.

Then again came a knock, louder than before, and it seemed to recall her more to herself, for she tenderly clasped the hands upon the breast and stepped to the door.

Opening it, she stepped half out, and confronted half a score of stern-looking men in scamen's garb.

CHAPTER XII.

STRANGE VISITORS.

UNDER most circumstances, Bessie would have started back in alarm, seized her trusty fire-arms, and shown a bold front, at the discovery of a group of men before her door, for those were dangerous times, and her father had continually warned her to be on her guard.

Especially would she have been the more frightened, as her eyes also swept above their heads and beheld the rigging of a brig at anchor in the little harbor, though the high bank kept all below the cross-trees from being visible.

In the same glance too she noticed that the heavens were becoming overcast, and a storm was rapidly rising in the eastward and threatening to burst with fury upon sea and land.

It was the coming tornado which the black crew of Percy Wyndham's launch were then pulling with terrific vigor to escape.

"Pardon, missus, but we wants ter see Juan Gito," said the apparent leader of the men, and with his comrades he politely doffed his sea cap at sight of the maiden, while all stepped backward as she stood before them.

"Who are you?" she asked, looking over the crowd inquiringly.

"Honest tars, miss, who wants ter see Cap'n Gito, to put him in ther way o' making a few square pounds o' gold, and by the same token helping us to do the same."

"I am Juan Gito's daughter."

"Oho! I is proud, and so say all of us, ter meet ther Lady o' ther Lagoon, of whom we has heerd much.

"We salutes you, miss," and by one accord they all made obeisance.

Bessie, with white, grief-stricken face returned the salute by a bow.

But who were these men, she wondered?

Were they smugglers, with whom it was said her father was connected?

Were they some of the crew of the Skeleton Schooner, sent there by Forrester the Freebooter, who had escaped when his vessel was captured by Percy Wyndham in the Black Lagoon?

Were they men come to avenge themselves upon her, because she had piloted the Jack-o'-lantern to the secret retreat of the corsair craft?

These thoughts flashed like lightning through her mind, and she determined to know who were these men, and what was their mission with her father.

"What flag do you sail under, lads?" she asked in an assumed, off-hand manner.

The question, coming as direct as it did, and from feminine lips was a poser, for all startled looked at each other with surprise, and the spokesman hesitatingly answered:

"We is sailors o' fortin', miss, going with ther craft that gives us the most gold, grog and grub."

"Ah! you may then belong to the crew of Forrester, the Freebooter?"

Again they started, but the spokesman answered:

"If you is in the secret with your father, miss, we can talk more at ease."

"First answer me what vessel is that at anchor in the harbor?"

"The packet brig Lioness, miss, out of Mobile and bound for New Orleans."

"Why has she put in here?"

"Because we wanted to see your father, miss."

"Again I ask you, what is your business with him?"

The men seemed uneasy under the piercing eyes and questions of the girl, and all remained silent.

"Answer me!" she said, sternly.

"Well, miss, long ago we sailed with your father, and being as we are now without a captain, and knowing him well, we put in here to ask him to be our skipper."

"Why does the Packet Company not get a captain for the brig?"

"The brig don't fly the Packet Company's flag now, miss."

"Ah! am I to understand that she has been seized?"

"Yes, miss?"

"By whom?"

"We lads, miss."

"For what purpose?"

"To make your father cap'n, miss, and go on a cruise o' our own."

"Turn pirates?" said Bessie, with a sneer.

"Pirate is a harsh word, miss, and we hain't used to it, leastwise not yet, for the worst we were guilty of, when your father was our secret leader, was smuggling."

"But since he gave us up, years ago, things haven't run on a level keel, and as the Government has run us from our haunts, we thought to come and ask your father to take us in hand again."

"And this then is what you have come here for?" asked Bessie, in suppressed tones.

"Yes, miss."

"And you tell this to me?"

"Yes, miss, seeing that you must know what your father's business is, as we have heard he was in league with Forrester, the Freebooter; but we don't come like paupers, miss, for we shipped on board the Lioness as honest passengers, took her into our charge a couple of hours ago, and run her in here for your father to say what is to be done with her passengers and cargo, while, if he don't like the brig, she is fast enough to help us to a craft that will do better."

Bessie gazed straight into the face of the speaker who had spoken thus boldly, and then remained silent an instant, while her face was rapidly overcast with the different emotions that flashed through her mind.

At last she said, in a low, earnest tone:

"Men, you have come here to see my father."

"Behold him!"

She threw open the door and stepped aside as she spoke, and a cry broke from every lip, as their eyes fell upon the dead form of Juan Gito.

CHAPTER XIII. BESSIE'S RESOLVE.

THE men who had come to the cabin of the cliff fisherman, were one and all of them hardy sailors of the coast, and had led lives which had brought them face to face with many a sad scene.

They had faced death and misery in its worst forms, but now, when Bessie Gito stepped aside, threw open the door, and pointed to the corpse of her father, involuntarily they started, and stood with awe before the dead, uncovering their heads as with one thought.

"The cap'n dead?" said the spokesman of the group, in a hushed voice.

"Yes," was the low, stern response of the maiden.

"Did he die a nat'ral death, miss, or were he killt?"

"Come in, for yonder tornado is upon us, and I will tell you of his death."

"See! how black those clouds are, and how the winds roar."

"Is your vessel safe, think you?"

"Yes, miss, for we stripped her for the blow, and the lads on board know enough to let go both anchors, and there's no danger of their dragging in that snug little harbor."

"Then enter the house, and I will tell you of my father's death."

The tornado was now upon them, and the door was barely closed when the winds struck the cabin with a force that made it rock, and momentarily all believed that it must go to pieces.

But Juan Gito had done his work well, and, like the good ships, from which its timbers had mostly come, after the first shock, it seemed to weather the storm without danger of being destroyed.

Seeing this, the men drew closer to the

stark form lying across the room, and gazed in silence upon the face of the dead.

"Miss, it hasn't been often of late years, that we have seen the cap'n, and he's aged som'at since the old smuggling days, but it's him for all that, and, as we liked him, for he were a true man ter friend or foe, we feels for you in your sorrow, and wishes we could console you."

"But we is rough men, lady, with more curses than prayers on our lips, and can only say we feels for you, and are your friends."

"Yes, lady, Binnacle Ben has spoke with ther tongues of all of us," said another, in an honest, blunt way, while several more, not knowing what to say, simply uttered most fervently the one word:

"Amen!"

The eyes of Bessie filled with tears, and her lips quivered, as she tried to speak.

Before her stood men who were avowed outlaws, and who had come there for the purpose, as they said, of making her father their chief, in some bold enterprise which they had already inaugurated by daringly seizing the fleet packet brig Lioness, plying between Mobile and New Orleans.

And yet these men had hearts, and she was deeply touched by their words, while after an effort at self-control she said:

"Men, I thank you for your sympathy, and I am glad to see that you honored my father, though he may have once led you in a career that was criminal."

"For my sake, as I grew from girlhood, he cast off his old associations, as much as he could, and I little dreamed, until only a short while since, that he was other than an honest fisherman."

"But he is dead, and be his crimes what they might I forgive and forget all, except," and her voice became hard and stern, "that he was killed."

"Killed!" cried all in chorus.

"Yes, he was cruelly, cowardly slain by one whom I once loved, and now hate with tenfold fury."

"Does he live hereabout lady," asked Binnacle Ben, noticing her flashing eyes and heaving breast.

"Yes."

"Give us his name, lady, and up to the brig's yard-arm he goes," was the blunt remark.

"No, I reserve the pleasure of myself taking his life," she said grimly.

"You shall do it, lady, and we will see you through for we lads think honest revenge ought to be tended to same as one's prayers."

"No prayer shall pass my lips until I am avenged upon that man."

"I swear it," said Bessie with intense earnestness, and noticing her pallid face, Binnacle Ben wished to lead her from her grief, so asked:

"Is there any cruiser hereabouts now, lady, that you can tell of?"

"None that I have heard of nearer than Mobile and New Orleans."

"Since the capture of the Skeleton Schooner the cruisers are not seen so frequently in these waters."

"Well, miss, they will have to look lively soon again, for though we have heard the capture of the Skeleton Schooner was a most clever and daring deed, the famous Skimmer of the Seas escaped, and he's afloat once more."

"What?" asked Bessie in surprise.

"Yes, lady, he escaped, got to Mobile, folks say, in your father's boat, and then came to us and tried to get us to help him cut out the armed cutter that is stationed at Pensaco'a."

"We might have listened to him, for times were dull with us then, but Captain Forrester told us of a little plan he had, if the cutter couldn't be cut out, which we didn't like, and that was his intention of capturing the very packet brig lying at anchor in your snug little harbor."

"Hal! is he then on board the brig as your leader?" quickly asked Bessie.

"Not he, lady, though he might have been, if he had not wanted us to turn against your father and your sweet self."

Bessie's face showed the surprise she felt at these words, but she could only ask:

"Captain Forrester turn against my father and myself?"

"Yes, miss, for he told us your father had laid up heaps of treasure, which was hidden near his cabin, and that he would force the secret from him, and we might have the gold, while he would take as his share a gem of

more value to him than all else, meaning yourself, lady."

"Forrester said this to you, Ben?" and Bessie's voice trembled.

"He did, miss, and more, for he was to kill Cap'n Gito, and make you his wife, he said, for you wouldn't know that he had slain your father."

Bessie drew a deep sigh, but asked in the same suppressed tones:

"And what answer gave you him?"

"We told him we preferred smuggling to pirating, though the gold did not come in such quantities, and that he had better look elsewhere for a crew."

"And he did so?"

"Yes, lady, he left our retreat with several lads who were willing to follow his fortune, and as we knew the cutter would soon find us out, we concluded to act for ourselves."

"And what did you do?"

"You see, lady, we had lost our chief in a hot chaso sometime before, and my shipmates made me a kind o' cap'n; but I hain't no hand to navigate, so I proposes to ther lads to make one o' Forrester, the Freebooter's thunder, go to Mobile, take passage on the Lioness, capture ther craft for ourselves, and then, instead of robbing our old cap'n, to make him our leader, and let him capture the Skimmer of the Seas."

"It was certainly good of you not to turn against my father, and from my heart I thank you."

"But where is this Freebooter chief now?" said Bessie, with feeling.

"I did hear in Mobile, afore we sailed in the Lioness, that the Red Rover Corsair had boarded a craft off Perdido Inlet, and after robbing her, let her come on to the town, and a sailor who knew him well, said the Skimmer of the Sea was on the pirate deck, and that is what made me tell you he was afloat once more and it would not be safe for you to stay here."

"You are right, my good friend, but what am I to do, for if I go elsewhere on the coast, he will find me out," and Bessie's face wore a hunted, pitiful look that touched those who gazed upon it, and caused Binnacle Ben to say in his blunt way:

"Go with us, lady, and we will find you a home."

"We hain't no cap'n as knows anything, but we can find our way to some place where you can dwell in safety, and then, if we can get a chief, we'll go on the hunt for this Forrester the Freebooter, and mayhap the Government might give us a pardon for what we has done, if we capture him."

At this there was a general murmur of assent among the shipmates of Binnacle Ben, while Bessie started at his words, her face flushed and paled by turns, and her eyes turned brightly with the intensity of her feelings, while she cried in ringing tones:

"Men, I am resolved what I shall do."

"You wish a leader."

"I will be that leader!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VOW AT THE GRAVE.

IN clarion tones again rung out the words of Bessie Gito.

"Men, I will be your leader!"

A silence fell upon all after she had spoken, and it was a picture never to be forgotten by one who had made up the thrilling tableau.

There, at the side of her dead father, one hand resting upon his head, the other pressed against her own heart, she stood, upright, pale, but with heaving bosom and flashing eyes, her long hair, which had fallen from its fastenings, hanging around her like a veil, and her white dress giving her a statue-like look.

Before her grouped the smugglers, their faces showing the excitement they inwardly felt, though none of them spoke.

Thus the silence lasted for full a minute, when Bessie, seeing that her influence was felt, cried:

"Men, thanks to my dead father, whom you loved in life, and whose memory you revere in death, I am a thorough sailor, woman though I be."

"It was I that acted as pilot for the vessel that captured the Skeleton Schooner in the Black Lagoon, though little did I dream of finding my father upon the pirate decks."

"The chief, Forrester the Freebooter, I had saved from the gallows, and his return for that service was to be, you tell me, to drag me down to dishonor, and take the life of my fa-

ther, who had also saved him from death on one occasion.

"Hence, against him I have a feeling of intense hatred and a longing for revenge.

"Your good vessel, and your brave hearts can aid me to reap that revenge, and gold shall be your reward.

"Make me your leader, and this very hour will I cast the past behind me, and live to become a very Nemesis, while the gold you have so striven to gain, which you have sinned for, struggled for, you shall have.

"I mean it by the dead body of my father."

She seemed to fathom each heart, and to look into each eye as she spoke, and like a very queen she stood before them, fascinating, awing, and controlling them with her magnetic power.

Instantly Binnacle Ben broke out with:

"Lads, three bravoos for our chief, The Lady of the Lagoon!"

With a will they were given, the hoarse voices momentarily drowning the fierce roar of the tempest without.

"Thank you, my lads, and believe me I will do my duty toward you in all things, though I follow the bent of my humor in carrying out the aim of my life.

"From this moment I am no longer the Lady of the Lagoon, but *Captain Bessie*."

"Captain Bessie, the Lioness of the Sea," shouted Binnacle Ben, and three more hearty cheers were given, when one of the smugglers hinted that it would be the proper thing to drink the health of their new captain, and the success of the cruise.

Bessie at once took the hint and set the flagon and glasses before them, after which she set to work preparing for her departure from her home.

What she cared to take with her was soon packed up, and then the graves were dug at her request, and the form of her father laid away to

"Sleep the sleep that knows no waking."

First, she intended to bury her father in the sea, and so wrote the first note which Percy Wyndham had found upon his return to the cabin; but Binnacle Ben suggested in a delicate way that it would be better not to set sail on their first cruise with a corpse on board, and then came to her the thought of burying her dead, and leaving an open grave for Mark Mortimer, when he should have fallen by her hand, for the young girl was now nearly crazed by her grief and thoughts of revenge.

All being in readiness, Bessie determined to at once go on board the brig and set sail, fearing that Percy Wyndham might return for her at any moment, for well she knew his noble heart would prompt him to come back and be near her in the storm that had swept up over land and sea, and that his adventurous spirit would cause him to risk any danger to get back to the cabin.

Bidding the men go ahead she remained to kneel for a moment at the grave of her father, and in suppressed tones, yet terribly in earnest, the words broke from her lips:

"Father, though in thy grave, hear my vow, for here I swear to hunt down on sea or land, wherever he may be, the one who took thy life, and bring his body here to bury in that yawning grave which I have dug for him!"

Quickly she arose from her knees, turned away, and upon reaching the cabin took a last, lingering look at each room, and each familiar object.

Then, with tearless eyes, white face and stern lips, she walked quickly down to the beach, where Binnacle Ben and his comrades stood awaiting her coming, and gazing with surprise at the wild sea that was tossing about in the little harbor of Cliff Cottage.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LIONESS SHOWS HER CLAWS.

THE scene that met Bessie's eye was certainly a wild one, when she tripped down the pathway from the cliff and stood where Binnacle Ben and his mates were standing, just out of the reach of the waves.

The little harbor, only a few acres in size, was a perfect maelstrom, for the wind was from a quarter that forced the waves around the point of land, the sheltering arm of the basin, and drove them with fury across it, to break with loud report upon the beach.

Then too, the winds were so fierce in their strength, that they sent volumes of water flying far upon the cliff, and already were the

seamen drenched with the spray which had dashed upon them.

Out from the shore, only a couple of cables' length, was a trim-looking brig, clinging with both anchors to the bottom, and riding lightly upon the waves, in spite of the savage gusts of the wind and the chaotic waters, though of course she was deluged from stem to stern.

Upon the deck of the brig, and clinging astern as best they could, were visible a score or more of men, eagerly watching the party on shore, but whose voices, when some stentorian tones were shouted shoreward, hardly reached the ears for which they were meant.

A closer glance at the brig showed that her topmasts were housed, and that all precautions had been taken to strip her thoroughly to meet the gale.

Beyond the point, out upon the waters, the spray, mingling with the inky, trailing storm-clouds, rendered it impossible for the vision to penetrate to a great distance, and the white waves, hurled back from the sheltering land-arm, and then recoiling upon the opposite shore, gave to all the appearance that the good ship was hedged in by a wall of breakers.

Here and there upon the shore lay a small skiff, shattered by the waves, and closer in under the point rode at anchor, though with drowned decks, the little sailing craft which had been the pride of Juan Gito, and one of which he had pretended to use as his fishing smack, but more commonly filled her with a cargo of wines and other smuggled goods.

"Well, Lady—"

"*Captain Bess*, if you please, Binnacle Ben," corrected Bessie.

"I admit it, miss—I mean cap'n; but as I were going to remark, mi—cap'n, you see we are ashore, and likely to remain for some time, for that storm hasn't risen yet to show what it can do."

"I believe you are right, Ben, it does look as if the clouds were getting blacker, and the winds rising," answered Captain Bess, with a knowing look around her.

"Then here we are, like fish in a net, and if the brig jumps about much more, the lads aboard will be here to join us."

"You fear the cables may part?"

"Yes, miss—cap'n, I mean."

"Then we had better get on board at once."

They looked at her in astonishment, and Binnacle Ben said:

"Didn't you tell us, cap'n, you was a sailor, if you do wear petticoats?"

"I did."

"And yet you talks about getting on board the brig?"

"Yes."

"In this blow?"

"Certainly."

"With the waves running as they do, and the wind blowing my hair out hair by hair?"

"Why not?" was the cool question.

They looked at her with the expression on their faces that plainly showed that they had made a mistake.

"Why no boat could live, that's why not," bluntly said Binnacle Ben.

"My man, choose more respectful language when you address me, for I am your captain, and intend to be such in the full meaning of the word."

"Now come with me to yonder break in the point which you see, and we will go out to the brig in my surf skiff, which has lived outside in storms as severe as is this one."

She moved off along the cliff, and in wonder and silence they followed her, watching her slender, cloak-enveloped form in admiration as she went along.

At last she reached the break in the cliff, and got down under the shelter of the rock, while she said, pointing to a surf skiff that was drawn out of the water and lay half concealed in a niche:

"There is my surf skiff, so throw my baggage into it and shove it into the water, and the wind will drive us to the brig, while you can steady the boat with your oars."

"I will take the helm."

In silence the half-score of men obeyed, going into the water to their waists with the skiff, and then springing into it at an order from Captain Bess, who had already coolly taken her seat at the tiller.

The rebound of the next swell caught the surf skiff upon its bosom, and sent it flying from the shore, when the wind sweeping over the point of land drove it along at terrific

speed, while six of the smugglers had the oars out steadying it all in their power.

Straight for the brig it went, like an arrow from a bow-string, and when almost upon it, the clear, bugle-like voice of Captain Bessie shouted:

"Aboy there! throw us a line!"

Almost instantly it was done, and skillfully caught, and the surf skiff swept around under the brig's stern, and was drawn close aboard, when other ropes were thrown, and watching their chances, each occupant of the boat was safely drawn up to the vessel's deck.

"Cast the skiff off, and all hands get up those anchors and set sail!" came in the ringing voice of Captain Bess, when Binnacle Ben, the last to leave the boat, was drawn on deck.

The order fell like a thunderbolt upon all who heard it, for not one of the brig's crew had a thought of going to sea in that blow, and a burly seaman sprung forward and confronted Captain Bess, while he cried:

"You can't put on airs here, girl, though you did handle that skiff well I'll admit, but men, not women have the say aboard this craft."

"Sh—, Bo'sen, the girl are Juan Gito's daughter, and he being dead, she is to be our cap'n," cried Binnacle Ben in the ear of the man who had spoken so rudely.

"No petticoat cap'ns for me, Ben. If Juan Gito is dead, then I'll be master of this craft, as I see you can't be trusted," cried the huge sailor.

But with the spring of a panther Captain Bess was by his side, and a pistol, she had quickly drawn from beneath her cloak, stared the mutineer squarely in the face, while she cried in suppressed tones:

"Drop on your knees, sir, and beg my pardon, or you are a dead man."

The man turned livid, but hesitated, and again came the words:

"Obey, sir, for I am captain here!"

The man saw that death to him was certain, if he refused, and down he went like a clumsy bear.

"Ask my pardon, sir!" and the pistol was pressed against his face, the slender finger on the trigger.

"I do ask it, miss, if you really is to be chief," was the whining response.

"I am chief now. Rise, and see that you obey me. Here Binnacle Ben, you act as my first officer, and get those anchors off the bottom, and set what sail the brig will stand to run out!"

"Lads, we has made no mistake, for we has a cap'n, if she does wear petticoats," was Binnacle Ben's remark, as he went forward among the men.

With a will the crew sprung to work, and in ten minutes the brig, under storm-sails only, began to beat out of the little harbor, Captain Bess herself at the helm, and, aided by Binnacle Ben, managing her with a skill that won the admiration of even the bully she had so quickly tamed.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAPTAIN BESS.

THEIR girl chief had not been ten minutes at the helm of the brig, before the smuggler crew felt that she was indeed a thorough sailor.

She gave her orders to Binnacle Ben in a low, decided tone, when to port or starboard the wheel, and handled the craft in a manner that won admiration and astonishment.

The run into Cliff Haven, as the little harborage was called, was a comparatively easy task in a light breeze and still water, for the shoals could be seen there, and the channel followed.

But with a perfect tornado sweeping over the sea, the waves tumbling shoreward with fury, to be hurled back masses of snowy foam and spray, it was by no means a light undertaking.

In that same blow and sea Percy Wyndham was then striving to run out in the *Glide*, to go to the rescue of Bessie Gito, and knew, after once gaining an offing, that his yacht could not live, so put back.

The large bull of the brig, however, better met and stood the fearful chop seas, and stripped of her topmasts, and only with just enough sail to make her mind her helm, she beat out of the harbor on sharp, quick tacks, that soon brought her to deep water.

Once a sail was blown away, but an order from Captain Bessie quickly replaced it, and

twice on going about, the brig staggered fearfully, and her decks drowned with water, it was feared she must founder; but each time the nerve and skill of the young girl brought her out of the danger in safety.

Having gained an offing, Captain Bess laid her course south by west, and the brig went flying along at a terrific pace.

"May I ask, miss—I mean cap'n—which way you are going now?" said Binnacle Ben, politely, when the vessel was bowling along like the wind, evidently bent on some direct course toward a given point.

"Certainly, sir, for I wish to have a talk with you, and with the boatswain—"

"Bo'sen Brail?"

"Yes. I shall make him my second officer, if he's a good man."

"Oh, he's a good man enough, cap'n, only a little restive of restraint, and was a little out of humor because the lads made me chief."

"Then call him, and come with me to the cabin, after you have placed two good men at the wheel, for it is impossible to talk here in this gale."

She quietly walked away from the wheel, while Binnacle Ben ordered two men to the post, and calling to Boatswain Brail to come with him, joined her as she was about to descend into the cabin.

"Say, cap'n, the passengers are all confined down there," said Ben.

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten that you told me you seized the vessel upon her voyage out."

"How many passengers are there on board?"

"Twenty-seven now, including children, but there was thirty one."

"What became of the other four?"

"You see they showed fight when we seized the brig, and we had to cut them down."

Captain Bess shook her head at this, and asked:

"What crew had the brig?"

"Twenty men in the fore-castle, cap'n, and then her three officers, and four stewards for the cabin."

"Were any killed?"

"The cap'n showed desperate fight, and was slightly wounded before we could take him prisoner, and five of the men were killed."

"This is a bad business, Binnacle Ben, and I must remedy it all in my power."

"How did you seize the brig?"

"We went on board as Government marines, going to New Orleans, and were all dressed up as such, while I acted as sergeant in charge, and when off Horn Island, we just surprised the captain and his crew, and after a sharp fight took charge."

"The passengers are all in the cabin safe, except those we had to throw overboard, and the captain and crew are confined in the hold, and in irons, for we wanted to see your father before we decided what to do."

Captain Bess was silent for a few minutes, and seemed buried in deep thought.

Then she said calmly:

"Well, I have decided what to do, and I expect your aid."

"You'll get mine to the end of the rope, fer ef yer hain't got a brave man's heart and knowledge, then I am a-falsifying," bluntly said Ben.

"And I'll back you up too, miss—"

"Captain Bess—"

"Beg pardon, sir, I meant Captain Bess," said Boatswain Brail.

"I thank you both, and as Ben here is to be my first officer, I will make you, Mr. Brail, my second."

"Thank you, captain," and the seaman touched his hat.

"Now it is not my intention to start upon my cruise by capturing a vessel that flies our country's flag, and is a regular packet, so I will take the brig to New Orleans, and use her as a decoy to capture the Skeleton Schooner, which lies at the docks there, undergoing repairs, and which has never yet raised the Government colors, or been put in commission."

"But can we do this, cap'n?" asked Ben, with glee, struck with admiration at the bold plan.

"Certainly; but I will need more men to handle the schooner."

"I can get you half a hundred."

"When?"

"Within two days," answered Ben.

"Where?"

"We'll pick them up at Barrataria, where

you may know both pirates and smugglers have their retreats."

"You know these retreats, Ben?"

"I do, cap'n."

"I want good men, not those who live only to kill and get gold."

"I'll get you good lads, that will be glad to be better if they get a chance to."

"Then we will pick them up on our way to the city, arrive there at night, drop anchor near the Skeleton Schooner, cut her out, and leave the brig in charge of her captain, with regret at the delay and trouble we have put him to."

"Cap'n, you has a level head; but has you decided on the flag you intends to run up?"

"I'll let you know my flag, Ben, when it goes up to the peak of the Skeleton Schooner," was the quiet reply, and then Captain Bess added:

"For the present I am to be known as a young man, so I will seek a state-room and put on a disguise which I brought with me."

"Then come with me into the cabin, that I may see the passengers, and address me simply as Captain Juan."

Bessie, so suddenly metamorphosed from a lovely girl into the bold, plotting, revengeful woman, the head of a crew of desperate men, then sought a state-room in the ward-room to disguise herself in man's attire.

CHAPTER XVII.

CAPTAIN BESS OFFERS TERMS.

WHEN, after half an hour's absence in her state-room, Bessie Gito appeared on deck, both Binnacle Ben and Boatswain Brail, who had their heads together in earnest conversation, failed to recognize her and started with alarm, as she suddenly confronted them, fearing that in some way the passengers had managed to escape from the cabin.

A smile crossed the sad face of Bessie, as she saw how complete was her disguise, and she said:

"I am glad to see that I am so well metamorphosed."

"That word's too big for me to pull the meaning out of, cap'n; but I don't fear to say that your father wouldn't know you in that rig," said Ben.

Bessie sighed at the mention of her father's name, and answered:

"Well, I will then pass muster as a young man?"

"The handsomest I ever seen, from the heel o' yer little boot, to the top o' yer proud head; you looks the boy, and a dare-devil one at that," frankly said Binnacle Ben, and his criticism was a just one, for Bessie had slipped off her luxuriant masses of hair, until only short, clustering coils clung around her haughty head, and wholly discarding her female attire, was rigged out in the picturesque uniform of the Mexican navy, which set off her elegant form to perfection.

It was a costume which she had once worn at a *Bal masque* when at school in New Orleans, and was certainly most elegant, and became her greatly.

In the sash of silk about her waist, were two gold-mounted pistols, and a short sword, the hilt and scabbard of which were set with precious stones, hung at her left side.

Her pale face had become stern, from grief and all she had passed through, and though beautiful, yet looked manly enough for her sex to remain unsuspected.

"Now come with me into the cabin, gentlemen," she said in a courtly way, and unlocking the companionway, she entered, followed by the two smugglers, who were more and more delighted at the chief they had so unexpectedly gotten to guide their destinies.

Upon entering the cabin Bessie paused, and a strange, sad scene met her gaze.

Before her were congregated the passengers of the brig, the men in irons, and the women and children seated here and there, all with fear depicted upon their faces, and many weeping and wailing from terror.

Like the very wind the brig was driving along; laying far over on her side, and the fury of the tempest was sufficient to awe the stoutest heart, even had not their being prisoners to pirates, as they believed, done so, and the uncertainty of what their fate might be preying upon them.

As Captain Bess and her companions entered the cabin, all looked up at them, wondering and dreading, for why had they come, was the question in the older minds, while the children

shrunk closer to the sides of their parents, as they recognized in Binnacle Ben and Boatswain Brail the two leading spirits of the attack of the brig.

Bessie saw the shrinking attitude, and well knowing what sorrow and suspense were to endure, wished to relieve their minds as quickly as possible, so said:

"My friends, have no fear, for no harm is intended you."

A sigh of relief went around, while one of the male passengers asked:

"Have you authority to say this?"

"I am captain here, sir," was the calm reply.

"Then where were you when those two brutes and their comrades seized this vessel, and for which act they shall hang?"

"You are in no position, sir, to talk of hanging those in whose power you are, and I warn you to keep a civil tongue between your teeth."

"I was ashore when this brig was captured, and finding that my men have made a mistake—"

"One that will cost you your life, young man," put in the talkative passenger.

But unheeding him, Bessie went on in her quiet way:

"Finding, as I said, that my crew had made a mistake in seizing this vessel, it is my intention to release the craft, her crew and passengers, upon my arrival at New Orleans."

"After you have robbed us of our valuables and gold," sneered the passenger who had before spoken, unheeding the signs of his fellow unfortunates for him to remain quiet.

"You are mistaken, sir, for not an article of value shall be taken from this vessel."

"That will not save your neck, my fine fellow, as the capture of this brig, and killing of some of her passengers and crew, will be enough to hang you."

Bessie turned her flashing eyes upon the speaker, and said:

"Ben, put that man in double irons, gag him, and take him to the hold to remain, until I order his release!"

"Ay, ay, sir, I'd have filled his mouth with iron long before this, sir, for he's a tough customer," answered Ben, while Bessie continued:

"And you, Brail, knock the irons off of the rest of these prisoners, if they will give me their paroles of honor not to interfere in any way with this vessel, or to leave this cabin."

The paroles were gladly given, and while the passenger, whose tongue had gotten him into trouble, saw his companions set free, he found himself in double irons and gagged.

He begged lustily to be spared the punishment, and others pleaded for him, until both Ben and Brail feared Bessie's heart would yield; but she was firm as a rock, and the man was taken away and put in the brig's hold, where were the crew and their officers, who were suddenly surprised by the entrance of the two leaders, in the attack upon the brig, their prisoner, and the very elegant youth who accompanied them.

"You are Captain Hart, of the Lioness Packet brig, I believe?" said Bessie, walking up to the commander of the vessel, a frank-faced man of thirty-five, who was fretting greatly over his capture.

"I am, sir," was the stern reply, and then he added:

"What new deviltry is going on now, that you put that passenger in irons, and gag him?"

"He could not appreciate kindness, sir, was insulting, and while I set his companions free, I punish him, as you see," was Bessie's cool rejoinder.

"Set his companions free?" cried Captain Hart, in surprise.

"Yes, sir."

"Why how can you do that, when we are driving along like a tornado in mid-ocean?"

"I knocked the irons off the prisoners, and bade them dread no harm being done them, for they should be free upon our arrival at New Orleans."

"What, do you say this vessel is going to New Orleans?" said the amazed captain.

"Yes, I am now bound for that port."

"Well, you have the temerity of Satan, to capture a vessel and then run her into the port for which she was bound."

Bessie smiled, and answered:

"And shortly after I arrive there, Captain Hart, you and your crew shall be left in command of your vessel, which I have merely chartered to take myself and men to the city,

but will pay you full price for my passage, as that of my men has been paid.

"Well, this is remarkable indeed; but your gold for your passage will not bring back the dead among my passengers and crew."

"That is unfortunate, I admit; but I can do no more than I have promised."

"Nor am I the man to ask it, for when I believed we had been taken by piratical cut-throats, I find that you are a gentleman, no matter what flag you may sail under."

Bessie smiled in her sweet, sad way, and it quite won the heart of the captain, who said with courteous manner:

"May I ask who you are, sir, for I did not see you in the attack upon us?"

"No, for I was ashore then, and in taking your brig as they did, my men made a blunder, which I wish to repair as much as lies in my power so to do."

"You are then, sir, in spite of your extreme youth the commander of these men?"

"I am their captain, sir."

"Some unfortunate midshipman of the American navy, I take it, whose temper has gotten him into trouble, and driven him to piracy," said Captain Hart, more deeply interested in his captor, and anxious to discover just who he was.

"I am unfortunate, sir, yes, fearfully so; but who, or what I am I care not to tell you," said Bessie in a tone that touched the heart of the captain and his men, and ere he could reply, she continued:

"If you will give your parole, for yourself and officers, you are at liberty to come on deck; but your men, though I release them of their irons, must remain prisoners in the fore-castle."

"Yet, if I see, between you or your passengers, the slightest act to cause me to suspect your intention to try and regain your vessel, I will hang you, sir, your officers, and every passenger thus concerned in the plot, to the yard arm of the brig."

All who heard the stern threatening words, knew that they were terribly in earnest, and Captain Hart responded:

"I cannot answer for hot-headed passengers, sir, and, as my men are to remain in durance, I prefer to share their fate."

"As you please, sir," and Bessie turned away, and followed by her two officers left the hold to the prisoners.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE JACK-O'-LANTERN SETS SAIL.

WHEN Percy Wyndham made known to his mother, after he had boldly breasted the breakers back to the yacht, what he had learned at Cliff Cottage, she seemed cast down with grief at the strange course pursued by Bessie Gito.

She dearly loved the girl, for there came back to her the remembrance of how her son and her slaves, after the fatal duel, in which she had killed Major Mortimer, all told her that she had not killed him, and remaining firm in this statement, it had driven her to the verge of madness, and for long weeks had she been confined in her own rooms as a maniac, until, escaping one night, like a hunted deer, she had fled to the forests and lived in desolate loneliness, called a ghost by those who caught sight of her, and shunned by all, until Bessie Gito had followed her to her woodland retreat, and taken her to her cottage home, caring for her with all the kindness and love which she would have shown a mother.

Through Bessie's act, Mrs. Wyndham had again met her son, who far and wide had searched for her, and thus had the poor woman learned why Percy had so deceived her, to protect her good name from the stain of taking human life, and once more united, all thoughts of madness had fled from the heart and brain of mistress of Lakelands.

To Bessie Gito, Mrs. Wyndham owed all this, and bitterly did she mourn the act of the young girl, who had gone forth alone in the world to follow the bent of her revengeful humor.

Well did she know herself what revenge was, for she had held Major Mark Mortimer responsible with his life for his sin to her; but now that he was in his grave, the still small voice of conscience welled up to her in the hours of darkness, and she would have sacrificed her own existence to bring him back from the tomb, or at least that her hand might not have been the one that had placed him there.

"This is fearful, Percy, to think of, but

what can we do?" said Mrs. Wyndham, when she had heard all that her son had to tell of his visit to the cabin.

"God only knows, mother, what we can do; but how Bessie ever left this place in this blow, is a mystery to me," answered Percy.

"Perhaps, after all, these letters are only to hide her real purpose, and that she has gone forth to commit suicide by drowning in the sea."

"No, mother."

"Why do you think to the contrary?"

"Because Bessie is too much like you, mother."

"I do not understand you, Percy."

"Pardon me, good mother, but Bessie has a revengeful nature, and, like you, believing herself wronged, and in fact most cruelly she has been, she will leave no stone unturned to reap a bitter revenge."

"I believe you, Percy, in spite of her dovelike nature, she has a heart of fire."

"Yes, and she would never take her own life until she had accomplished her object, and I am assured that she has gone to New Orleans to seek out Mark Mortimer."

"And woe be unto him when she shall meet him face to face."

"Yes, for she will know no mercy toward him, and who can blame her?"

"But how did she go?"

"Ah! there's the mystery; but she says in her letter here, that circumstances unexpected permitted her to carry out her revengeful intentions, and the only way I can interpret that, is that some vessel passed near, which she went out and boarded."

"Or perhaps put into the harbor."

"No, mother, for had it done so, it would have been a mad captain that would have put to sea in this tempest."

"She may have at once set to work digging the graves, when I left, and then gotten away in one of her boats in the lull that followed for awhile, after the first blow of the tornado, and, I now remember that I saw a vessel off the point, when I was trying to beat out in the glide."

"Well, what can be done about it, Percy?"

"I will lie at anchor here, mother, until we can land and make all safe at the cottage, and then I will leave you at Lakelands and run on to New Orleans, via the lake, for if Bessie has gone thither by a vessel, she has doubtless boarded a packet out of Mobile, or a coaster, and must run round by the river, so I will not be much behind her, if any."

"I think that is the best course to pursue, Percy, and you must find the poor girl and bring her back to Lakelands, for I will be a mother to her."

Thus it was decided, and, as soon as the sea and wind went down sufficient for a boat to go ashore, Percy Wyndham and his mother landed and went up to the cottage, which was securely locked up.

Then, returning on board the Jack-o'-lantern, the yacht headed for Lakelands, running before the gale, and after sending Mrs. Wyndham on shore, set sail for New Orleans, by the way of the Lake.

As the yacht swept out of the harbor, the wind was still fresh, but the sun was just setting in a clear sky, and the beauty of the scene had lured out upon the piazza of The Everglades its fair mistress, Mabel Mortimer, who gazed at the receding vessel an instant, and then seizing a spy-glass from the bracket where it rested, leveled it at the pretty vessel.

Instantly her face crimsoned, for her eyes fell upon the tall, elegant form of Percy Wyndham, and he too held his glass to his eyes, and they were bent upon her.

Simultaneously both glasses dropped, and both the young man and maiden, thus caught trying unknown to each a glimpse the one of the other, turned away in confusion.

CHAPTER XIX.

A RECOGNITION.

THE more Bessie Gito pondered over the strange situation in which she found herself the more she seemed willing to relinquish herself to the torrent that was carrying her irresistibly downward.

The early training her father had given her had certainly made her a proficient sailor, while she understood thoroughly, from hard service and the practice she had had, the laws of navigation.

Then too her father had skilled her in the use of a sword, until she had proven teacher to

the tutor, so quick was her apprehension, her movements, ay, and her strength was by no means slight, as her rounded limbs were full of muscle, which her constant exercise had hardened.

Fire-arms she was also skilled in the use of, and had often supplied their humble table with game which she had brought down with crack wing shots.

Her nerve was also remarkable, and she had the courage to do and dare anything, and goaded on by the wrongs done her, and her thirst for revenge upon the wronger, it was no wonder that she undertook to lead bold men to the consummation of her ends.

Thus, by early training, contact with dangers and nature, she was well fitted for the mantle of authority which she had thrown around her to wear to the bitter end.

At heart she was as pure as the petals of the rose, and her sympathy was ever excited for the unfortunate and those in distress, and now that she had cast off the guise of her sex, she was yet determined that she would be guilty of no act against her Government or its people to be ashamed of.

Did she find Mark Mortimer in New Orleans she had made up her mind to visit upon him the direst penalty for his crimes, and the power she held as chief of a bold, fearless crew would aid her in carrying out her designs.

After that it was her determination to hunt down the man she had befriended, Forrester, the Freebooter, who had afterward contemplated and plotted such treachery toward her father and herself, and, in bringing him to justice, serve well her country and her own revenge.

Having done this, she would ask pardon for her crew, and giving up the world forever, go to her humble cottage on the cliff and pass the days until the end of life must come.

Having arranged her crew into watches, and gotten all ship shape on board the brig, Bessie held on her course through the storm until long after nightfall, when the winds were so fierce and the sea so wild, that she determined to lay to and ride out the gale, for the vessel was laboring in a way that was most dangerous.

Giving her orders, they were soon executed, the bows swept up to the wind, and the brig lay to, riding out the tempest.

Slowly the night of storm passed away, the winds still keeping up their fury, the waves still wild and fierce, and at last the gray light of day stole over the waters, which yet looked somber beneath the sullen, threatening clouds that drove along above them.

It was a cheerless breaking of a gloomy day, and all on board felt its influence, for they were completely tired out by the long and continued storm.

"Sail ho!"

The cry came in the clear voice of Captain Bess, whose searching eyes had discovered a strange craft not half a mile distant, and beating up toward the brig with evident intention to get a nearer look at her.

The cry caused all on the brig's deck to instantly scan the waters, and as the eyes of Binnacle Ben fell upon the stranger, he shouted in stentorian tones:

"The Red Rover, by Neptune!"

"All hands to make sail!" cried Captain Bess, loudly, at this startling announcement.

"Surely, yer hain't going to run, cap'n, from a friend, for he won't harm us," said Binnacle Ben, with apparent surprise.

Bessie turned quickly upon him and asked:

"Do you know that craft?"

"Yes, cap'n."

"Is it the schooner known as the Red Rover?"

"It is, sir," answered Ben, who had at last learned to drop the *miss* in speaking to Bessie.

"It is a pirate craft!"

"Yes, cap'n."

"Well, this brig is not, and I have no time to form a closer acquaintance with the Red Rover, at least, not now, while it seems you have forgotten that you told me Forrester, the Freebooter, was seen on the decks of that craft."

"Golden Anchors! but I did forget it, and you don't want to fall into the clutch of that man."

"Come, lads, this here brig has got to show a clean pair o' heels, or we'll have to fight, for no bloody pirate can take our young cap'n from us."

The crew echoed this sentiment with a

cheer, and in a minute's time the brig fell off so as to feel the wind, and darted away swiftly, while Captain Bess, in spite of the stiff gale that was blowing, ordered more sail to be set.

Far over under the pressure careened the fleet and trim vessel, and her decks were fairly flooded, as she bounded on into the very teeth of the wind, for the brig was forced to beat into the gale, as the pursuer was coming up from leeward.

That it now became a chase dead to windward, was evident, for the schooner shook out the lower reefs in her sails and pressed on with all speed.

Observing her closely, Bessie saw that she was a long craft, with narrow, sharp hull, heavily armed, and with tall, raking masts, capable of spreading an immense amount of canvas.

She seemed to cut through the waves, rather than to ride them, and was gaining steadily upon the brig.

"She'll overhaul us by night, captain, if not before," said Boatswain Brail, who still did the duties of boatswain, and was so called, in spite of his promotion to acting second officer, while Ben had also not dropped the prefix of Binnacle to his name.

"Yes, if we do not dodge her by running for the coast and hiding in some lagoon," answered Bessie, with the utmost calmness of manner.

"But I don't know this coast too well, captain, nor does Ben, and we have no pilot on board."

"But I do know the coast, Mr. Brail, and if we cannot outfoot that fellow, we must give him the slip inshore."

"My glass, please."

The glass was handed to the Girl Chief, and she turned it upon the deck of the coming vessel.

"Mr. Brail, Forrester, the Freebooter is on that craft, for I recognize him now distinctly, standing upon the deck with four other officers."

"Shake out those reefs, please, for this vessel must not be taken."

CHAPTER XX.

THE DEFEATED PIRATE.

THE vessel in pursuit of the packet brig Lioness, was a noted rover's craft of that day.

The name of her captain none knew, or what he looked like; but it was reported that he was a man of great skill as a sailor, and who had an island retreat somewhere in the Gulf, that the cruisers of America, England and Spain had been unable to find, any more than to catch the fleet craft itself.

But to that secret island, the haunt of piracy, with an author's privilege, which permits him to

"Walk boldly

Where angels scarce dare tread,"

I will bear my reader thither, at least in imagination if not *in propria persona*.

Toward the close of a balmy day, some two weeks, or more, after the capture of the Skeleton Schooner by Percy Wyndham in the Jack-o' lantern, a small sail-boat, jib and main-sail, was going along at a rattling pace over the waters of the Bahama channel, and heading toward one of the many keys, or islands, which are so numerous thereabout.

The sail-boat held but a single occupant, was a craft of stanch build, and got all it could out of the seven-knot breeze that was blowing.

As it came from the direction of the Florida shore, it had evidently put out of some harbor on that coast.

The occupant was a man of striking appearance, with a long black beard, hair of the same hue falling upon his shoulders, the latter being broad and massive, and his form elegant.

His eyes were strangely full of beauty, languid and with long lashes to shade them, but in spite of being half hidden by the beard, his mouth wore an expression that was not winning.

He was attired in a short storm-coat, sailor hat, duck pants and boots, and wore a sash about his waist.

A jewel of rare beauty glittered on the little finger of his left hand, which rested upon the tiller, and about him was an air of refinement, which showed that he was not one born to wear the suit of a common seaman.

His eyes were fixed upon the larger of a group of islands, some two leagues ahead of him, and which arose above the others, and

was encircled by them in such a way that they had received from the seamen of that day the very suggestive name of Hen and Chickens.

The larger island had bold, precipitous sides, and no opening was visible to those on the decks of a vessel sailing by, while the reefs that were scattered about the smaller isles seemed to render their approach most hazardous, and it was not known to the merchant vessels and cruisers that any craft had ever had the temerity to attempt a landing upon either the shores of the "Hen" or "Chickens."

But still the single occupant of the little boat held on his way unswervingly, and when he drew within a cable's length of the first breaker, did not hesitate.

The wind was directly upon his port beam, and he simply lowered his jib, hauled in, trimmer, his main-sail, and held the halyard of the sheet in his hand for ready use.

Fixing his eyes upon a different point of one of the islands, he got his mast in range with it, and kept straight on through the wall of foam that denoted the breakers, and at a point where there was evidently a safe passageway for a craft of much heavier size than the one whose destinies he was guiding.

The little boat danced about upon the rough waters, but held on her course as unswervingly as before, and after a run almost to the edge of the first island, suddenly eased off her sheet, her helm was jammed a-port, and she went bounding away dead before the wind, and running along parallel with the shore of rocks, from which it was not distant twice its length.

Having skirted the island to the end, the sheet was again hauled in, and with the wind once more abeam, the boat was headed directly for the second of the islands, and which was another of the "Chickens."

This island was rounded in a way that put the boat on a lee shore; but she pointed well, the water seemed deep beneath the keel, and having passed it by, the largest of the group of isles was the next point of destination.

As the boat neared this, it could be seen that the cliffs were seamed here and there with wide breaks, and into one of these, which the water invaded, the sail boat was lowered.

As the bold pilot neared it, here and there were seen the hulls of several vessels, which had been loaded with stone and sunk, so as to form a breakwater, but which had the appearance of reefs at a distance.

Gliding in between these barriers, which protected a small cove, half encircled by a cliff, the mariner lowered his sail, and his boat drifted into a basin, just large enough to conceal a couple of large vessels, and the rocky walls of which rose upon three sides high enough to soar above the topmasts, and thereby make a secluded retreat for a craft desiring to hide, and a safe one too, as the rock-loaded hulks broke the fury of the waves from the northward.

Against the sides of the wall of rock, a dismantled vessel had been securely moored by heavy chains, and upon her decks was a broadside, facing so as to command the entrance to the basin, of six long eighteens.

Alongside of the hull, which seemed placed there to serve the purpose of a pier, or jetty, the mariner let his boat glide, and seizing the painter sprung upon the deck and made fast.

Not a soul was visible, as he glanced around him, and he descended into the cabin, which was large, and not uncomfortably furnished.

But no one was there, and going on deck again the intruder seized hold of a rope ladder that was made fast to the deck, and the top of which disappeared over the edge of the cliff far above his head.

Up this, with the ease and confidence of a perfect seaman, the stranger went, until he at last stepped on *terra firma* at the top.

The island then appeared to his view like a mere pile of rocks, only toward its center a few stunted trees were visible; beneath the shelter of one of them stood a stoutly-built cabin.

Still no one was to be seen, and the strange visitor paused and gazed around him, allowing his eyes to sweep over the course he had just come.

A moment he remained in silence, and then his lips moved and he said aloud:

"At last I stand again upon my Rock of Gibraltar, for here I am master."

"But the Rover is not in, and here I must await her coming."

"Well, I am the defeated pirate, Forrester,

now they call me, and because that accursed young planter cleverly took from me my schooner, they will think that I am conquered, and merchant craft will throw their sails to the breeze with more confidence.

"But they know not Forrester, the Freebooter, as men call me, if they think I am to be trodden under foot, for I have a reserve force they little dream of, and before long I shall again plant my flag upon the blue waters, and be again feared as the Skimmer of the Seas."

"That was a clever deal of young Wyndham, his capturing the Skeleton Schooner, and I have yet to ferret out who was the traitor that placed the Jack-o'-lantern in his hands, and thus enabled him to do it."

"And as for that girl, the fair Lady of the Lagoon, she betrayed my hiding-place, and, as her father was let go free, though found upon my pirate deck, I believe he too was treacherous, and I shall hunt him down, and yet bring the head of his beautiful and proud Bessie down in the dust, for I am revengeful to the bitter end."

"And Planter Percy Wyndham too must suffer, for he took from me my beautiful Skeleton Schooner."

"Had those cowardly smugglers of Appalachee Bay, whom I have so often befriended, been willing to follow my lead, I could have gone to New Orleans with them, and cut my schooner out; but the Rover will do as well; and more, I think it necessary to look after that same young officer I made commander of that vessel, for I really begin to suspect him of late."

"Now, to see where the keeper of this island is," and Forrester, the Freebooter, walked quickly back from the cliff toward the cabin among the stunted pines.

CHAPTER XXI.

KIT, THE CABIN BOY.

WITH light, quick step Forrester, the Freebooter, strode back to the grove of trees, in which was situated the cabin before referred to.

It was a stoutly built cabin, made from the timbers of vessels, and large enough to accommodate a score of inmates.

Before the door, swinging between two trees was a sailor's hammock, and it held an occupant.

That occupant, at first glance appeared to be a boy, and was asleep.

The approach of the freebooter did not rouse him from his slumber, and the intruder drew near and gazed in silence upon him, as he lay in the hammock, one hand beneath his head.

It was a face in which the features were refined, and clear-cut, each one being strongly marked.

But the face was pale, and seemed haggard now, while the lips were firmly closed, as with thoughts of a disagreeable nature which would not away even in slumber.

A sailor suit, the shirt open at the neck, covered the slender form, and the feet and hands, were small and shapely.

A belt was about the waist, and in it, were a pistol and long, slender-bladed knife, the latter without a scabbard.

"Kit, the Cabin Boy of the Red Rover!" said Forrester half aloud, when his eyes first fell upon the form in the hammock.

And then he added:

"Why has Lieutenant Don left him here as guard, and seemingly alone too?"

Drawing a step nearer he was about to awaken the sleeper, when suddenly he started, and there broke from his lips the words:

"Holy Padres! now the secret of that startling resemblance is solved, for as I live, Kit, the Cabin Boy, is none other than Kate Langdon. Lieutenant Don must be her brother."

"Ha! ha! ha! she meant treachery toward me, and he is her ally, and now I can account for the Red Rover making no captures since I placed him in command."

"Kate, my beauty, is this the welcome you give your husband to his island home?"

He called the words in a loud, clear tone, and with a wild cry the sleeper sprang from the hammock, and stood trembling before him, while, as the eyes rested upon his face, the lips parted with the words, fairly hissed forth:

"Frank Forrester! thank God you have come."

"Then you are glad to see me, sweet Kate?" he said with a sneer.

Her hand dropped upon the butt of the pis-

for in her belt, and she answered in a low, earnest tone:

"Yes, I am glad to see you, Frank Forrester, for I have not forgotten that you made me your wife, for I loved you then, and, to get my inheritance, killed both my father and mother, and sent a hireling to sea to kill my brother, who was in the navy, for you wished all my riches, or none.

"But I discovered your crime in time to save my life, and you had to fly, or die upon the gallows, and since then you have been cruising the seas as a pirate.

"So be it, for such a career is worthy of you; but you are in my power now, and the end must come."

"In your power! Bah! I will hurl you from yonder cliff into the sea, and thus punish you for daring to ship on board my vessel as a cabin boy," said the pirate chief.

She shook her head, and answered:

"No, you can do no such thing, for I feel that my destiny is to put the noose of the hangman around your neck.

"I was determined to pursue you to the bitter end, so in this disguise, and with my brother, who would not allow me to come alone, we shipped on your vessel as sailors, and we have tried hard to get you in our power.

"My brother you made commander of your other vessel, and we have tried, oh, so hard, to get the opportunity to capture you and both of your vessels together, but fate has foiled us, and at last I determined to remain here to await your coming, and boldly take your life.

"My brother sailed yesterday, without knowing of my intention, and I have feared he would at once return for me; when he discovered I was not on board; but now I have you in my power, and he will come to find you dead, or my prisoner."

The man laughed lightly, but said:

"Well, Kate, your words explain the mystery of why the Red Rover has made no captures since I placed your brother in command.

"I saw in him a daring young sailor, and I made him my lieutenant, little dreaming that he was Raoul Langdon of the navy, and your brother, though there was a resemblance in his face and yours, I could not recall of whom.

"Now, my sweet girl, I have lost my schooner, and have come here to take command of my other craft, and my first duty will be to hang your brother, ay, and yourself, for your treachery, for as you have discarded the garb of your womanhood for the attire of a man, you must expect no mercy.

"Come, give me those toys your hands rest upon, for they are dangerous playthings for such as you."

He stepped toward her as he spoke, but she suddenly drew the pistol from her belt, and throwing it to a level, fired.

The bullet was well aimed, struck him squarely in the breast, but was flattened against the gem-studded hilt of a poniard he always carried there.

The shock caused him to step backward quickly, and half reel, as about to fall, and seeing it, the woman drew the long, slender blade from her belt and sprung upon him. Whipping out the knife which had saved his life, he caught her blade upon it, and it broke at the hilt, and she was disarmed.

But, ere he could seize her in his powerful arms, she slipped from him and bounded away like a deer toward the cliff.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE FATAL SHOT.

ENRAGED at the attack of the woman upon him, without feeling that his conduct toward her and hers, in the past more than justified it, Forrester, the Freebooter, at once started in rapid pursuit.

His face was livid, his eyes glaring, and he cried as he ran:

"By Heaven, woman, you shall behold how I punish your brother, and then your fate will be a fearful one."

She paused when she came to the edge of the cliff, for on that island of rock there was no escape for her, no place of refuge to which she could fly.

But seeing that his face showed the direst hatred to her, she feared to come within his grasp, and bounded away along the edge of the cliff.

Rapidly he followed her, and heard her glad cry, as she came to the spot that overlooked

the basin, and beheld the little boat moored against the dismantled bulk.

Over the cliff she swung herself upon the rope ladder, and rapidly descended, with a nerve that was remarkable under the circumstances.

She was a fleet woman, and went down the rope ladder with the agility of a cat, so that she had gotten half way to the hull, when she heard his voice above.

"Hold, woman, or I fire!"

Her response was a mocking laugh.

"Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Will you heed?"

"No."

"I warn you."

"I heed not, for I now see how you came here, and your boat shall bear me away to safety, and this rock shall be your tomb!" she shouted back, exultantly, pausing on the rope ladder as she did so.

He drew a pistol from beneath his storm-coat and leveled it at her, but still she heeded it not.

"Kate, I do not wish to kill you," he said, earnestly.

"Bah! you have no mercy for man or woman," she answered, as she reached the deck.

"Return, and let the past be forgotten and forgiven," he called out.

"Murderer of my parents, how dare you ask me to forget and forgive," she answered, as she seized the rope that held the sail-boat, and began to untie it.

He leveled the pistol downward, but, as though feeling his aim would be useless at that distance, he hastily began to descend the ladder.

She saw his intention, and, as quickly as she could, sprung into the boat and seized an oar to shove it off with.

She succeeded in doing so, and in a minute more would have been safe; but he halted in his descent and called out:

"Once more I warn you!"

She measured the distance, and seeming to feel that Fate would aid her to one day punish him, called back:

"I defy you!"

"Drop that oar!"

"Never!"

"Then you die!"

With his last word, he leveled his weapon and pulled the trigger.

The report and a cry came together, and the oar fell with a splash into the water, for the bullet had shattered the hand that held it.

But, undaunted still, she leaned over, seized the oar in her left hand, and began to urge the boat further away from danger.

But, dropping the unloaded weapon to the deck, he drew another from his belt, and with a muttered curse, again fired.

A wild shriek broke from the lips of the woman, and tottering backward, she fell in the bottom of the boat, writhing in agony.

Even his hardened heart was touched as he heard her dying groans and saw her writhing in anguish, and he turned his gaze away.

But, when he looked again at her, he gave a startled exclamation, for he saw that the tide had seized the boat, and, with its ghastly freight, it was drifting rapidly out to sea.

He knew no other craft was on the island, and should aught happen to the Red Rover, that island would indeed be his tomb.

Was it a retribution upon him for his crimes, he wondered?

Hastily he descended to the deck, and throwing aside his clothing, sprang into the basin, and with strong, rapid stroke started in chase of the drifting boat.

But, when almost near it, to his horror, a livid, anguish-stamped face was raised above the gunwale, and the burning eyes of his victim were turned upon him.

Instantly the face disappeared, and then slowly, and evidently with a great effort the jib was raised, and feeling the breeze, the boat's movement was quickened, and it glided away before the wind at a pace that he could not equal by swimming.

"Hal hal hal! Forrester, the Freebooter, though dying I have foiled you."

"Go back to yonder rock and die!"

The voice was feeble, but he heard the words and with bitter curses took the advice and swam back toward the island.

But tide and wind were against him, and only after desperate energy was he able to at last drag himself upon the wreck, where he sunk down utterly prostrated and overcome.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RED ROVER.

ABOUT the time that poor Kate Langdon, the deserted wife of Forrester, the Freebooter, in her disguise as Kit, the Cabin Boy, was drifting from the island retreat, a vessel hove in sight, and headed on the same course the sail-boat had pursued, a few hours before.

It was a schooner of a build that made honest craft look on her with suspicion, and feel anxious to give it a wide berth.

Of the class known as *rakish*, it was also thoroughly armed, at the same time manned with a crew whose faces wore the look of hardened crime.

They were dressed in white duck pants, blue shirts, and red skull-caps, and presented a picturesque, but by no means an honest appearance.

All were armed, and about the masts, and ranged in brackets along the bulwarks, between the very heavy armament for a vessel of its tonnage, were small-arms, from muskets to cutlasses and boarding-pikes.

The vessel had all the neat appearance of a man-of-war, discipline reigned supreme, yet still there was that air about it that would not have surprised an honest tar to see a black flag go up at her peak.

Aft, leaning over the top-sail, was a young man with a face that did not bear the stamp of an evil life, though it was stern and sad, and the expression resting upon it was that of daring resolution.

It was a dark, handsome face, and the uniform he wore proved that he was an officer, while there was that about him that would impress a stranger with the idea that he was the commander of the vessel.

Excepting the helmsman, he was alone on the after part of the deck, and seemed lost in contemplating the group of distant islands, with the large one in the midst, already described to the reader as the retreat of pirates.

"Helmsman, there comes a small craft out from behind the first island," he suddenly cried.

"It's true, cap'n; a little sloop, an' she seems ter be driftin'," answered the helmsman.

The young officer seized his glass, and turned it upon the little craft, which was about a league away.

"Yes, she is drifting, with wind and tide, for her jib is hauled but half-way up, and there seems to be no one in her."

"Wonder what she can be doin' in these parts, cap'n?" asked the helmsman.

"I cannot surmise; but she has, doubtless, drifted away from some vessel."

"Head so as to pick her up, Felter."

The helmsman obeyed the order by changing the course of the schooner, just as the crew came aft in a body.

"Well, men, what is it you want?" and the young commander turned somewhat sternly upon the crowd of seamen.

"Cap'n, we wishes to speak to you, sir, and we hope for a straight answer," came from the lips of one who seemed to be ringleader.

"Well, my man, speak out," was the frank response.

"You see, cap'n, you must excuse us if we are wrong; but the truth is, sir, you and cabin-boy Kit shipped on board this schooner six months ago, and shortly after the chief put you over the heads of his luffs and made you cap'n."

"None of us said a word against that, not even the luffs you were promoted over, at least not to us, for we all saw you was a perfect sailor and a brave man."

"But now four months have gone by since you were cap'n, and not a prize have we taken, though they have been on the seas."

"Well, lads, what does all this mean?" calmly asked the young captain, without the slightest show of anger.

"It means, cap'n, that it looks mysterious, and as we left your pet shipmate, Cabin boy Kit, on the island two days ago, and you are now putting back after him, and yonder boat adrift is in sight, it makes us feel that you may not be square, and that you are taking us into a trap, for you are mysterious-looking, anyhow."

"Well, my men, I am captain on this vessel, and I shall do as I think best."

"Go forward now, and let me hear no more of this."

The words were spoken firmly, and there

was a look in the face of the young officer that showed he meant what he said.

But the men looked at each other, and did not move at the stern command, while their ringleader said:

"Cap'n, we don't mean you harm, unless you are treacherous, and to prevent trouble, we have already locked the other officers up in the ward-room, and now we will make you prisoner, until we see that all is square at the island."

"If not, we'll hang you to the yard-arm; but if it is all right, we will release you to take command again."

The eyes of the young officer blazed with indignation.

He was alone with three-score men, for his brother officers had been locked up, as the ringleader had said.

He well knew that appearances were greatly against him, for not a single prize had been captured since he had been placed in command by Forrester, the Freebooter.

But he would not be bullied by his crew, and determined to make a bold front, so said, in ringing tones:

"Men, I warn you off at your peril."

But the ringleader glanced over his supporters, now that they were ripe for the work to be done, and instantly he cried:

"Upon him, lads, but do not wound or kill him!"

They rushed forward at the cry, and there followed two shots, two heavy falls, and then a third man was cut down by the young officer, who had thrown his pistols away and drawn his sword.

A moment only the struggle lasted, and then, borne to the ground by the weight of numbers, the young captain was held and securely bound.

Then the men arose and left him lying upon the deck, and by him were four dead forms, which had fallen before his brave resistance, and among them was the ringleader, the first that had measured his length.

"Cap'n, you made a brave fight, and we knew you had it in you; but you has got to remain bound until we see fit to let you go," said a self-appointed leader, and he then called to some of his shipmates to stand ready and seize the little sloop, which was now not far distant, slowly going before the wind, with about one-half of its jib hauled up.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DEATH SENTENCE.

A FEW moments after the young captain of the Red Rover had been securely bound, the schooner luffed up and two seamen sprung into the sloop.

Instantly a loud cry broke from a number of lips, and an instant after over the bulwarks was dragged the lifeless body of the supposed lad, whom they all knew as Kit, the Cabin Boy.

His right hand was clasped hard upon his side, and the life blood, from a wound beneath, had stained the shapely fingers crimson.

"Great God! it's poor Kit," cried one of the crew, and all bound that he was, the young captain struggled to his feet, his face livid, and his whole form quivering.

"Bring that boy here!" he commanded, in tones that were at once obeyed, for they spoke volumes to those who heard them.

Instantly the slender form was borne aft and laid at his feet.

"Men, you accused me of leaving this lad on the island, to plan a trap for you."

"He lies before you dead, so that gives your accusation the lie."

"Men, release my bonds, that I may go yonder and find his murderer."

"No, cap'n, not until we know you is square," said one.

A look of intense anguish crossed the handsome face, and with an expression in his eyes that was most beseeching, he said, in a voice that quivered in spite of his effort at self-command:

"Men, I beg you to cut my bonds, for this dead form is no boy, but a woman, my sister."

A murmur of amazement ran through the crowd, and stepping quickly forward, the ringleader cut the thongs that bound him.

Instantly he dropped upon his knees, and bent his head over until his lips touched the cold upturned forehead, while he said in plaintive tones:

"Poor, poor Kate! And this is your sad fate!"

In whispers the men spoke, the sloop was again cast adrift, and the schooner was headed on for the basin, the pilot following the channel with the same skill which Forrester, the Freebooter, had shown in reaching his piratical retreat.

As the schooner, with her sails lowered, slowly glided up to the hulk and was made fast, the crew suddenly broke forth with three cheers, for out of the cabin suddenly came none other than their chief, Forrester, the Freebooter, and up to that moment they had been suspicious of some treachery.

Worn out by his long swim, Forrester had entered the cabin of the hulk and thrown himself down to rest, and sinking to sleep, had been aroused by the blow of the schooner, when it ranged alongside.

Instantly he sprung to his feet, believing that Kate had feigned being severely wounded, and had come back to make another attempt upon his life.

But, to his delight the sight of the Red Rover schooner greeted him, and he sprung quickly upon the bulwarks, in answer to the cheer given him, and cried:

"Thank you, my lads! but where is your captain?"

They silently pointed to where Lieutenant Don, as Forrester called him, but whose real name was Raoul Langdon, still bent over the body of his dead sister, too much wrapped up in his deep grief, to even know that the schooner had reached the island.

With cruel face Frank Forrester strode aft, and drawing a revolver touched the forehead of the young officer with the muzzle, while he cried:

"Well, Raoul Langdon, you have found your dead sister, I see, and your time comes next."

The voice and words seemed to rouse the young man, as from some deep dream, for he looked up in a dazed kind of way at first, but his eyes rising to the face of the chief, he sprung to his feet with a savage cry, to fall his full length, stunned by a blow upon the head from the pistol barrel.

"Throw that treacherous dog into the hold, for to-morrow he dies at the yard-arm," yelled the chief.

The order was quickly obeyed, and the stunned officer was tumbled through the hatches.

"Now cast that body overboard, to become food for fishes," was the next cruel order, and it too was obeyed with equal alacrity, the beautiful form of poor Kate, the deserted wife, falling with a heavy splash into the waters, and sinking forever into their dark depths.

CHAPTER XXV.

A FRIEND AMONG FOES.

DARKNESS crept upon the face of the deep, shutting out the smaller islands from the view of those who stood upon "Gibraltar," as the pirate chief called his rocky isle and retreat, and the crew of the schooner had nearly all gone up to the cabin to have a night of jollification.

It was the custom of Forrester to allow his crews a few days ashore each month, if in his power, to have a grand *orgie*, and the men were always constantly delighted when the prow of their vessel was turned toward their retreat.

Then the prize money, from the various sea-robberies, was wont to be divided, so that the men could bury their treasure upon the island, if they so desired, until they had need of it.

Happy with having so soon gotten command of a vessel as good and fleet as was the Skeleton Schooner, and with no upbraiding of conscience at having killed Kate Langdon, and left her brother stunned in the hold of the vessel, awaiting death on the morrow, Forrester, the Freebooter, was determined to have a night of carousal, and consequently gave all hands leave to come up to the cabin, where the liquors, taken at different times, were stored.

There was no need of a guard on board the schooner, for now that the Skeleton Schooner was a prize to the United States Government, no vessel could come in, and it was not expected that any one cared to leave.

The crew, therefore, almost with one accord, climbed up the ladder and went to the cabin among the pines, and soon after their shouting, laughter and rude songs were borne to the ears of Raoul Langdon, as he lay in the hold where he had been thrown.

All was darkness around him, and it was some time before he could collect his scattered senses.

His head was heavy, and putting his hand to it, he felt the gash made by the pistol barrel.

Then, like a flash, the remembrance of all came back to him, and he groaned in agony of spirit as he recalled the sad death of his sister.

"By Heaven! but that man shall die by my hand, for that cruel deed, and then the vile crew can do as they please with me," he muttered.

Rising to his feet, as though determined to at once carry out his threat, he looked upward, and beheld stars glimmering, where the hatch was not drawn close over the opening.

And as he looked, the heavy hatch was drawn slowly back, and, relieved against the star-lit sky, he saw the head and shoulders of a man.

Down, close to the hatchway came the face, and a voice whispered:

"Captain!"

Raoul Langdon made no reply and again came the whispered call:

"Captain!"

Still no reply, and then Langdon heard the words:

"My God! I hope that blow did not kill him."

This seemed as if the strange visitor meant kindness toward him, and he determined to answer, if called again.

Aloud, next time, yet in a hushed tone, came again:

"Captain!"

"Ay, ay, my man," answered the young officer.

"Thank God, you are alive; but I will drop you a rope and can you come up on it?"

"Yes."

The rope was made fast to a gun carriage near by and the other end dropped into the hold.

Almost instantly by it, Raoul Langdon ascended to the deck, and confronted the one who seemed to have come in the night to befriend him.

At a glance he recognized the man, as the coxswain of his gig, and a resolute, handsome youth, whom he had often thought was out of place on the deck of a pirate.

"Ah! it is you, Harding?" he said.

"Yes, captain, and I have come to save you, for the chief intends to string you up in the morning," was the reply.

"Well?" was the quiet remark of the young officer.

"But it is not well, sir, for you owe it to yourself to escape."

"That is impossible, Harding, as you should know, for are not all of the boats securely locked up when we come into port?"

"True, sir, but the little sloop, which the chief says he came to the island in, I noticed, just at sunset, had drifted upon the beach of Little Gull Island, and—"

"Ha! the boat is there is it?" cried Langdon, quickly.

"Yes, sir, and you and I are both good swimmers, and can easily make the league to Little Gull."

"Then you go with me, Harding?"

"Yes, captain, for I am no pirate at heart, and shipped upon the schooner merely to save my life, when the vessel I was mate of was taken."

"Good! then we go together; but I am half-tempted to go up to the cabin, where I hear those devils carousing, kill Forrester, and take my chances with the men."

"That would be madness, sir, for they would at once hang you."

"No, let us escape, and then plot the capture of the Rover, for the Skeleton Schooner is lost."

"No!"

"True, sir."

"When and where?"

"The chief told us to-night, that he got into a hot fight with an American cruiser, and barely escaped, when he put into the Black Lagoon for repairs."

"He sent his sloop-yacht, Jack-o'-lantern, under Lomax, to New Orleans, for half a hundred more crew, for he had lost heavily, and the craft came back loaded with marines, under a young planter, and he alone escaped, while the schooner was carried off in triumph to New Orleans."

"Well, this is news, Harding."

"It is indeed, sir, and I believe, knowing

all that we do, if you are willing to try it, we can in time take the chief, who will now command the Rover."

"By heaven! Harding, you strike the right chord now."

"Come, we will go at once."

Quietly they walked to the bow of the schooner, and slipped over into the water, after relieving themselves of their outer clothing, which was tied upon two oars, to be towed after them as they swam.

Once out of the basin and the current was in their favor, and they went along with strong and rapid strokes.

After swimming awhile, Raoul Langdon suddenly asked:

"Harding, what was done with my sister's body?"

"Thrown into the sea, sir, by the chief's orders."

The young officer swam on in silence for some time longer, and then cried quickly:

"By heaven! Harding, we have made a mistake?"

"How so, sir?"

"We should have set the schooner on fire, then made our escape, and return here in a cruise for the accursed band."

"True, sir; but it is not too late, for they will carouse at the cabin until daylight."

Instantly the two turned to swim back to the island; but the current set dead against them, and the little sea that was running also was not in their favor, and after a desperate struggle, they were compelled to give it up, and continue on to Little Gull Island.

The sloop was found aground, and soon gotten off, and quickly they set sail to drop the pirate haunt as far astern by daylight as it was in their power to do, for well they knew that the schooner would start in pursuit as soon as their escape was discovered.

As if to aid them in their daring flight, the wind sprang up quite fresh, and the fleet little boat went bowling swiftly along toward the Florida shores, and causing hope to rise high in their hearts.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE WRECK.

I WILL now return to the chasing of the packet brig, *Lioness*, some ten days after the scenes related as transpiring at the pirate Gibraltar, by the schooner *Red Rover*, on whose deck stood Frank Forrester, the Freebooter Chief.

When the dawn came, and the drowsy, rum-crazed pirates awoke, ready for any excess of deviltry, the discovery was made that the prisoner had escaped.

How he had done so was not known, as the hatches had been closed, until the man Harding was found to be missing.

As the boats of the schooner were all present, it was of course surmised that the fugitives must be on the island, and a diligent search was made for them.

They not being found, and well-known to both be superb swimmers, the other islands were visited by boat crews, and all were carefully searched.

Wild with rage, Forrester offered large sums for their recapture and uttered threats against his whole crew if they were not found, but all to no purpose, for after two days' diligent work in looking for them, the schooner set sail.

Under their chief she at once began her red work of murder and robbery on the high seas, and the crew were delighted to have gotten rid of Captain Don, as they called their last officer, who had commanded them for months without taking a single prize.

It was a week after leaving the island haunt that the schooner was caught in the fierce storm which swept over the Gulf and its shores.

But the schooner was a most staunch sea boat, and when it could not scud before a gale, could be luid to, and thus ride out any storm.

At dawn one morning, the second day of the tempest, the *Lioness* was sighted by the sharp-eyed lookout on the *Red Rover*, and Captain Forrester was at once summoned to the deck by the pirate officer in charge.

"Head for her, be she cruiser or merchant-man," was his first order, as he coolly arranged his glass to level upon the brig.

"I know that craft well, and she must be our prize," he said, with more excitement; and then, in response to a question of his lieutenant, he added:

"It is the *Lioness*, one of the Mobile and New Orleans packets."

"She is as stiff as a staple in a blow, can show a clean pair of heels to almost any cruiser in these waters, and generally carries considerable specie in her hold, besides being a favorite passenger craft, and their gold and jewels are always to be taken into consideration."

"Crowd on sail, Senor Navallo, and see if the *Rover* has forgotten how to overhaul a prize while under the command of that accursed Langdon."

The sail was crowded upon the schooner, until even those desperate men who manned her guns cast many an anxious eye aloft, and then at their daring commander, in wonder at his temerity in forcing her as he did in such a gale.

But Forrester the Freebooter stood silent and calm near the helmsman, glancing at the flying brig through his glass, and determined not to let her escape him.

But Captain Bessie had recognized, as the reader will remember, the face and form of the pirate chief upon the schooner's deck, and was as equally determined that the *Lioness* should not be taken.

She already knew what the brig would do, and stand, and she put upon her every stitch of canvas she dare risk.

To the coast she knew was just four hours' sail, as the brig was then going and at the rate at which the schooner was overhauling her, if no accident occurred, it would take her just eight hours to run alongside.

In the gale that was blowing she did not believe that Forrester would fire upon the brig, for fear of dismasting her, and having her sink in the wild sea that was running, and thus lose his prize.

And besides, she knew if he did bring her to, he dared not board in such mad waters.

All these thoughts passed coolly through the head of Captain Bess, and she made her calculations with a nicety that showed her pluck and skill.

"If I can reach the shore, Binnacle Ben," she said, "I will run into the Lost Lagoon, and once in its mouth, we'll have all in readiness to put the boats ahead with muffled oars."

"Muffled oars, cap'n, in daylight?" asked Ben.

"Yes, so that they cannot hear us, for they will not be able to see us, if I get in four cable lengths ahead of the schooner."

"Well, we'll have all ready, cap'n, so that the boats can be dropped, and the men in 'em in a second's time, almost."

"And, Ben, I see no reason why we should not fire upon the schooner from our stern guns."

"No, cap'n, but it hain't no use."

"No aim can be taken, I know, in this sea, but then accident might help us, you know."

"That's true, cap'n," answered Ben, and he called the gunners aft, and at once set the long eighteen, mounted on the poop-deck, to belching forth fire, smoke and iron at the schooner.

The shots flew so wild, that all knew it must be only accident if the schooner was hit in that wild sea; but, as her daring commander, without returning the fire, for the very reasons which Bessie had surmised, crowded on more canvas, by shaking out another reef in her sails, though at the risk of driving her bodily under the sea, she began to creep up the faster under this additional pressure, and it was considered best to keep the long eighteen at work.

Suddenly a cry came from forward:

"Wreck ho!"

All glanced ahead over the wild waters, and only after a close search was a small wreck discovered.

The mast, for it had had but one, was snapped off about a man's height from the deck, and to this had been nailed a piece of sail, that fluttered wildly in the gale.

The bowsprit was gone too, and every sea broke over the little wreck, while in the cockpit two men were seen waving their hats to attract attention, as though fearful the brig would go by them.

"It is strange that so small a craft as that could have lived at all in this tempest," said Captain Bess, turning the glass upon it.

"What shall we do, cap'n?"

"Try and save them, of course, Ben."

"But the schooner, sir?"

"Well, we must not desert those two men to

their fate, in spite of the risk we run ourselves from the schooner."

"If we luff up, cap'n, the schooner will be upon us, before we can get good headway again, and besides, no boat can live in this sea," said Boatswain Brail, in a tone of remonstrance.

"I know that wel'; but get a dozen men on each side, ready with lines and life-buoys, to throw them as we go by, and you, boatswain, who have a voice like a trumpet, go forward, hail them when we come near, and bid them spring into the sea and catch the lines as we dash by."

These orders of Captain Bess were quickly obeyed, and in a moment more the little wreck being but a short distance away, and dead in the course of the brig, the stentorian tones of Boatswain Brail were heard shouting:

"Wreck ahoy!"

"Ahoy the brig!" came back in a clear, manly voice.

"Jump overboard and catch at our lines and buoys as we go by," yelled the boatswain.

"Ay, ay, sir," came back in clarion tones, and the next instant both men were seen to spring off of the wreck and strike out manfully to give the brig a chance to clear their sinking bulk.

"Cast!" shouted Boatswain Brail, and half a score lines, with life-buoys attached, were thrown over from each side.

Hardly had they touched the waves, when the bows of the brig passed between the two men, who instantly grasped at the lines and buoys.

It was a desperate chance, and they received rude shocks, but they knew their danger, held on like grim death, and were drawn safely on board the brig, while a cheer broke from the crew at their rescue, and Boatswain Brail said:

"You are in luck, lads; but if it hadn't been for our young captain, you would have had to go under."

CHAPTER XXVII.

CAPTAIN BESSIE'S RUSE.

"My lads, we owe you our lives, for had yonder craft seen us, we would have shuffled off at the yard-arm."

"In the name of my friend and myself, I thank you."

So said one of the two men thus saved from a watery grave, and it is hardly necessary, I suppose, to tell the reader that the speaker was Raoul Langdon, and his companion, Harding, to whom he owed his escape from the *Pirate Gibraltar*.

"You are welcome aboard, lads; but come aft and thank the captain, and not us, for it was her idea to run between you and throw the life-buoys," said Boatswain Brail, leading the rescued mariners aft, and gazing upon the faces of each with considerable animation.

"Captain Ben, here are the men you saved," said the boatswain, as he joined the fair young captain aft, where she stood near the wheel.

In amazement they could ill conceal they gazed upon the beautiful creature whom the boatswain had addressed as Captain Bess, while she said in her low, pleasant way:

"I am glad to see you, gentlemen."

"Is not this the packet brig *Lioness*?" at last gasped, rather than said Raoul Langdon, so overwhelmed was he with astonishment, not only at the beauty of the maiden, but also at her being addressed as *Captain*.

"It is, sir," answered Bessie.

"And you her captain?"

"I am at present her commander, sir."

"Pardon my curious questioning, lady, for your boatswain addressed you by a feminine name, which your appearance also confirms, and allow me to offer for my shipmate and myself our sincere gratitude for our lives," and Raoul Langdon spoke with a courtly grace that was natural to him, and which impressed Captain Bess favorably with him, for she answered pleasantly:

"I am more than glad that we were able to rescue you, for it looked doubtful, and in fact your own nerve and strength aided you most; but how is it that you were so far off shore in so small a craft?"

"We were flying, lady—"

"My men call me Captain Bess," said the maiden as a significant hint, which was not lost on the young man, for he instantly said:

"Pardon me, I will remember in future, and permit me to introduce myself as Raoul Lang-

don, of the United States, and only lately escaped from the power of Forrester the Freebooter, who sails yonder craft.

"This gentleman is my friend and shipmate in misfortune, Mr. Henry Harding."

Bessie bowed, and said:

"You were then fugitives from Forrester the Freebooter?"

"Yes, Captain Bess, and I warn you against allowing him to capture your vessel, for he has no mercy."

"I well know that, sir; but what can we do?"

"If I mistake not, you were firing from your stern gun at the schooner, awhile since."

"Yes, but without effect, as the wild sea prevents aim."

"Permit me to act as gunner, for I have had some experience in firing in a heavy sea," said Raoul Langdon, quickly.

"Certainly, sir."

"Boatswain, call the crew of the gun back to quarters!" ordered Bessie.

They instantly sprung to their posts, the gun was quickly loaded, trained, and fired by the young officer, and a cheer broke from every lip upon the brig's deck, as the shot was seen to tear through the mass of men amidships on the schooner.

With great rapidity the gun was reloaded, and again discharged, the iron messenger this time cutting through the mainsail of the Red Rover, but doing no other damage, while a third shot brought another cheer from the men of the brig, as the slender foretopmast of the schooner was cut away.

As the schooner luffed up to the swinging topmast, the brig gained quite a little time, and, after a hot chase, glided into the Lost Lagoon just the eighth of a mile ahead of the pirate.

But, understanding Bessie's ruse to escape, for she explained it to him, Raoul Langdon, quickly taking charge of the boats had them all in readiness, and as the brig drove into the lagoon, they were lowered into the water, with towlines already attached, and the crews at their oars, and almost the instant the vessel ceased to feel the wind, she began to move forward under the impulse of the oarsmen.

In her own gig ahead, Captain Bessie, who knew the intricacies of the lagoon perfectly, led the way, while Raoul Langdon and Harding took the wheel of the brig, and guided her so as not to lose a fathom of vantage.

Once in the Lost Lagoon and the densely-wooded banks, with their draperies of moss, seemed like walls on either side, while innumerable bayous soon shot out from the main stream, one of which Captain Bessie turned into just as the sharp nose of the schooner appeared below, her crew rapidly lowering the boats to go in pursuit.

Boatswain Bessie and Binnacle Ben were both, in the mean time, up in the rigging lowering away the yards, and having accomplished their task, the brig was pulled into a bayou, hardly double its own breadth, and with the masts almost brushing the moss-covered tops of the trees arching over from either bank.

In silence, excepting the occasional splash of an oar, the brig moved on, turning into one bayou and then another, for they were like a perfect network, until, after a hard pull of an hour, upon turning a bend in the narrow stream, the men could hardly refrain from a cheer at beholding blue water only a short distance away.

Quickly the brig was gotten in trim once more, and, by the time she felt the roll of the sea, sail was set, the boats were called in and hauled up to the davits, and away darted the fleet craft, leaving the schooner a league up the coast, lying at anchor, and with her crew in vain reaching the lagoon for their longed-for prize.

As the Lioness gained an offing, in defiance Captain Bess fired a gun to attract the attention of those on board, and the scene of excitement that followed on the schooner was plainly visible with the naked eye.

Quickly gun after gun pealed forth, to serve the double purpose of wounding the brig, and recalling the boats which were then searching for her in the Lost Lagoon.

But the schooner was at anchor, and the shots flew wide of the mark, and those on board the Red Rover had the chagrin of seeing their coveted prize stand swiftly out to sea, and put away on her course for New Orleans, while their chief and two-thirds of his crew

were roving about in a bewildered way in the mazes of the Lost Lagoon, into which trap the clever ruse of Captain Bess had led them.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A COUNCIL OF WAR.

WHEN the Lioness was once more fairly upon her way, leaving danger for the present behind her, Captain Bess felt that it was due to the passengers and real crew of the brig to make known to them what had occurred, so that their fears might be calmed, and, in justice to herself, that they would not feel that she had broken her word to them.

In a few words she told them of the sighting of the Red Rover and the chase, and that she was now on her way to New Orleans.

They were certainly relieved by this information, for they feared that the vessel in chase had been an American cruiser, and had been given the slip by the clever pirate, for such they looked upon Captain Bess as being.

Returning to the deck, Captain Bess found Binnacle Ben and Boatswain Brail in low and earnest conversation together, and asked, pleasantly:

"Well, gentlemen, is anything wrong?"

"You do the talking, bo'sen," said Ben.

"Well, cap'n, Ben and myself were having a little talk together, and I'll tell you what it was all about."

"You see, both Ben and I are good sailors, first-class, and know a craft from keel to truck, and from rudder-post to bowsprit; but we don't know the water."

"That is, we hain't navigators, and if a cannon ball were to knock your pretty head off, why then we would be at sea for certain."

"We can creep along off-shore with a craft, but when we drop the land we don't know how to get back to it."

"Now we have seen that you know your business, and we don't want any better captain, for certain; but you do want better luffs,* and Ben and I can't fill the bill."

"I am a good bo'sen, I know, and Ben wouldn't make a bad sub-officer; but you want two good luffs, and my opinion is you've got the men on board to make 'em."

"And who are they, Mr. Brail?" asked Captain Bess, who had listened most attentively to the barangue of Brail.

"The two strangers."

"Ah, Mr. Langdon and his friend?"

"The same, cap'n."

"But I do not know that they care to serve."

"It's easy enough to find out."

"True."

"They are sailors, and we have seen enough of 'em to know that they understand their work, so just put 'em in our shoes, cap'n, and let us step back to the fore-castle, where we belong."

"You certainly are most modest, both of you, and I appreciate your desire to have matters go right on board."

"Oh! we hain't so modest as we look, cap'n, for I know if we happen to be caught, and there's any hanging to be done, the officers, not the crew, are the yard-arm jig-dancers," frankly put in Binnacle Ben.

Bessie laughed lightly at this, but said:

"Well, Brail, ask Mr. Langdon to come here, and also Mr. Harding, and we will hold a council of war."

The two young men promptly advanced at the request of Captain Bess, and saluted politely, while the young girl said:

"Gentlemen, may I ask if you have formed any plans for the future?"

"In what respect, Captain Bess?" and Raoul Langdon smiled.

"I will be more explicit, if you will bear with me."

They both bowed in silence, and Bessie went on:

"Circumstances, wholly unexpected to me, placed me in command of this brig."

"To be frank with you, the vessel was captured with the view of placing a certain person in command of her, and, as I understand it, making a free rover out of her."

"That person was dead, had been cruelly murdered, and I was just about to start upon a cruise, that had for its object revenge, and against one who had bitterly wronged me and mine, and, a trained sailor from my earliest girlhood, I offered myself as captain, and the

* The old style of speaking of lieutenants.

crew who had captured the brig accepted my services.

"I am alone in the world, and from my good friends here I learned that I have a foe who intended my destruction, and, as commander of a good vessel, I not only could thwart him in his purpose, but bring him to justice."

"That person is Forrester, the Freebooter, and it is my intention to take this brig to port, return her to the command of her proper captain, and then cut out the Skeleton Schooner, and in her hunt from the seas her former master."

"The world may call us buccaneers, but the end will prove just who and what we are."

"To cut out the Skeleton Schooner, and carry out my purpose, I need more men, and Binnacle Ben informs me that I can secure these at Barrataria."

"From the pirate rendezvous there?" quietly asked Raoul Langdon, who with Henry Harding had listened most attentively to all that Captain Bess had said.

"Yes."

"They are a treacherous, cowardly set, with not the courage to go to sea as pirates, but content themselves with pouncing upon unarmed vessels near shore, and then retreating to the bayous and swamps to hide."

"Still I must have more men."

"I can get you what you need in New Orleans."

"Ah! that is better then; but now, as both Mr. Brail and Ben, here, decline to act as my lieutenants, I beg to offer to you, sir, the position of first lieutenant, and to your friend that of second luff."

"You certainly honor us, Captain Bess, when we are wholly strangers to you; but with your explanation of your cruise, so frankly given, I can but say that I will as frankly accept your generous offer," said Raoul Langdon, earnestly.

"And I will also accept with thanks for the honor," returned Henry Harding.

"Then it is settled; and, Mr. Brail, you will be my boatswain, while you, Ben—"

"Make me quartermaster, for I can steer by compass, and be allus on board when wanted; but I am like a boat without an oar when I'm depended on for duties of an officer, and my head won't let me run on a level keel," frankly confessed Binnacle Ben.

All laughed at his reply, and Raoul Langdon and Harding entered upon their duties as readily as though they had not accidentally drifted into their berths on a vessel that yet dared raise no flag to its peak.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TRAPPING FOR A LAMB AND INSNARING A LIONESS.

WHEN the brig Lioness arrived in sight of the Delta of the Mississippi, it was night, and following the storm which had been so incessant and violent for several days, a light breeze had set in, which barely forged the vessel along two knots to the hour.

Suddenly, out from inshore the lookout sighted a small vessel coming, and instantly the always startling cry rung out:

"Sail ho!"

Captain Bess was silently leaning over the bulwarks, lost in deep and evidently painful meditation, while Raoul Langdon had charge of the deck, and was pacing to and fro, a cigar between his teeth.

At the wheel was Binnacle Ben, wholly "at home" there, and these were all that were on deck, excepting the watch, who were forward.

"Whereaway?" called out Langdon, in quick, terse tones, while Bessie aroused herself from her reverie, and listened for the reply of the lookout in the fore top.

"Dead ahead, sir, and heading for us."

"I see her."

"It is a large merchant ship, I think, Captain Bess, and with every sail set that will draw," said Raoul Langdon, handing the glass to Captain Bessie, who had hardly leveled it before she cried:

"And she is pursued, for there is a schooner close under her stern."

"One of those Barrataria pirates, I'll wager my commission."

"See! she has forged alongside the ship, and hark! they are fighting."

"With your permission, Captain Bess, I'll take two boat crews to the rescue, for those pirates go full-handed, and the ship has not over a score of men at best."

"Do so, sir, and if the captain of the brig and a boat's crew of his men care to accompany you, they can do so."

The captain of the brig was most pleased at the offer, and in five minutes' time three boats were dashing away toward the scene of conflict, carrying two-score brave men to join in the fray.

In the leading boat went Raoul Langdon, with fifteen men, and in the second came the brig's captain, with a dozen of his crew, who were delighted to get out of the hold and stretch their cramped limbs by a pull and fracas.

Then followed Boatswain Brail with a dozen more good men and true, while the brig, retarded by the light breeze, slowly brought up the rear.

The large ship in the mean time had come to, and alongside of her was lying one of those saucy-looking crafts known as the coast pirates, who had clambered over the high bulwarks of the large ship, and were fighting for booty upon her decks.

The merchant vessel was a clipper ship, bound into New Orleans, but seeing the little pirate stealing out from the land, had put about, and headed seaward under all sail, hoping to escape.

But her pursuer got four knots out of the two-knot breeze, and rapidly overhauled her.

As Raoul Langdon's boat touched the schooner, for he had headed for her, the fighting on the ship's deck ceased, and cries for quarter were heard; but so taken up with the capture of their huge prize had the pirates been, that they had not seen the brig, or if seeing her, had recognized her as a packet vessel, with not men enough to spare to send to aid her sister merchantman.

But great was their consternation, when suddenly an armed man sprung upon the schooner, and cutting down a pirate who opposed him, called out in trumpet tones:

"Follow me, men, and cut down every red-handed pirate!"

Over the bulwarks they went upon the ship's deck, and charged upon the surprised pirates, who quickly rallied to meet them, their leader shouting:

"At them, dogs, for they are but a handful of merchant lads!"

But Raoul Langdon met the charge firmly, and checked it, just as the brig's captain came over the side with his boat's crew to his aid, and was followed by Boatswain Brail and his men, for the few outlaws left on their schooner had been quickly cut down.

Seeing that they had friends come to their aid, the crew of the ship again seized their arms and joined in the *melee*, and at once the fight became fierce and deadly, for the pirates were still the equal of their foes in numbers.

But Raoul Langdon led his men with a rush and irresistible pluck that swept all before them, and the outlaws were driven forward, where many fell, while others sprung overboard, and still more cried for quarter.

In an instant the schooner was in the hands of the captors, and the pirates made prisoners, among the latter being their burly chief, to whom Boatswain Brail said:

"You made a mistake, captain, for you set a trap for a *lamb* and caught a *lioness*."

The captain of the ship was most profuse in his thanks for the service done him, and begged to know who had been his friends.

"The captain and crew of the *Mobile* and *New Orleans Packet Brig Lioness*," said Raoul Langdon, quietly, and calling to his men he returned on board the schooner, and with his boats in tow, set sail for the brig, which was now not a mile distant, refusing all hospitality and thanks the clipper's captain and passengers wished to shower upon him and his men.

CHAPTER XXX.

A MYSTERY AFLOAT.

THE clipper ship, which had so fortunately escaped capture by the Coast Pirate, was a richly freighted vessel out of New York, with a goodly number of passengers on board, whose purses were full to repletion.

Being a vessel of noted speed, the danger of her capture by sea rovers was slight, and consequently she had little means for defense.

That she had shipped a traitor on board, in the interest of pirates, was assured, as when her captain discovered the little schooner,

crowded with men, and apparently lying in wait for him, he had put back to sea at once, and ordered the guns, of which the vessel carried but six small ones, cleared for action.

Then it was discovered that they had all been spiked and were useless, while the pirate coming on more rapidly than the light wind would drive the large ship, soon had her as a prize, in spite of the stout resistance of her crew and those of her passengers who had aided in the defense.

Delighted at the rescue of the brig, the captain of the clipper held on his way into the river, taking care of his dead and wounded as best he could.

But, to his surprise, the brig did not continue on in his wake, and when he dropped anchor in front of the city, nowhere visible was the vessel whose crew had so gallantly come to his rescue.

At once the news of the attack and rescue spread over the city, and the agents of the packet company came on board to learn all they could regarding the *Lioness*, about which they had been most anxious, as she was overdue in port, and they feared had gone down in the fearful storm.

But they could not understand why the brig did not come on up to the city, as the wind had freshened, and certainly she should have come in close astern of the clipper.

There was another thing which they could not understand, and that was the large number that the clipper's captain had said, boarded him as crew of the *Lioness*, and he had to describe over and over again the handsome young officer who had led the rescuing party.

The description in no way tallied with their blunt captain, and they were all afloat with mystery.

Unfortunately there was no war-vessel in port, excepting the *Skeleton Schooner*, which had just been fitted out as a cruiser, but had no captain or crew, so a swift sailing vessel was dispatched down the river, to glean what tidings could be gotten of the missing brig.

In the meantime, the Governor-Commandant had been visited by the agents, with a request that he would send the *Skeleton Schooner* in search; but he said he cared not to take the responsibility, as the captured vessel belonged to the National Government, and he must await the arrival in port of some vessel of war.

But he promised, should none soon appear, and the brig did not put in an appearance, to ask young Percy Wyndham, the capturer of the *Skeleton Schooner*, and who had arrived that day in the city, to take a crew from the City Guard, who had served with him in his late capture, to man the fleet pirate vessel and go in pursuit.

This was all the Governor-Commandant would promise, and the agents felt that they had to bide his time, though feeling most anxious regarding the fate of their vessel.

When the agents departed from the gubernatorial mansion, night had come on, and with it a rain-storm, and they passed going up the broad steps, as they descended, a man in a heavy cloak.

There was that about his appearance that gave him the look of a naval officer, and one of them quickly said:

"Pardon me, sir, but are you an officer of the navy?"

"I am not, sir," was the reply.

"Pardon me again, but you are a sailor?"

"Yes."

"My anxiety, sir, must be my excuse for troubling you; but we hoped that an American cruiser had come into port, and could go in search of our vessel, the *Lioness* packet brig, which, after a most gallant capture of a pirate schooner off the Delta night before last, has not been heard of."

The cloaked stranger listened attentively to all that was said, and then replied:

"Your vessel is safe, gentlemen, though she has been delayed."

"She has her prize, the pirate schooner, with her, and will soon be in port."

"Indeed! this is joyous news; but what can have detained her so long?"

"That I cannot inform you, gentlemen, but I know that she is safe."

"Have you just arrived in port then, sir?"

"I have," and with a bow the stranger went on up to the door and gave a rap upon the heavy brass knocker, leaving the two members of the Packet Company to continue their way with light hearts, lightened by what they had heard.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE GOVERNOR RECEIVES A STRANGE VISITOR.

THE cloaked stranger, whom the agents of the Packet Company's brig *Lioness* had met going up the steps of the gubernatorial mansion, as they came down, after knocking, waited somewhat impatiently for entrance, if his nervous patting of his foot might be considered so.

At last a liveried colored butler appeared, and in answer to the question if his excellency was at home, replied:

"Yes, massa, but de Gub'n'r say he can't see no more persons to-night, unless it were *very* important, indeed, sah."

"It is very important that I should see him," was the reply of the stranger, whose knowledge of negro character seemed to be good, as a gold piece was dropped into the ever convenient palm of the colored butler.

"I guess it am, sah, and I will perceed ter tell him sah, that you is a navy officer, ef yer gibes me yer name?"

"Say simply that a sea captain wishes to see him."

The negro evidently thought the title rather high in rank for the youthful face of the visitor, which the hall lamp fell full upon; but he simply bowed, and ushered the visitor into a waiting room, and departed on his errand.

"Lordy, but de Gub'n'r must see dat young gemman, sartin," he muttered, as he cast his eye down upon the gold piece and saw that it was half an eagle.

The Governor was alone in his library, excepting a decanter of old sherry on a stand at his elbow and, in dressing-gown and slippers, had settled himself for a comfortable rest.

"Well, Caesar, what is it?" he said, a little curtly to his factotum.

"A young gemman, sah."

"What does he want?"

"To see you, sah."

"But I will not be disturbed, for I have work before me."

Caesar glanced significantly at the decanter, as though he thought the work would not be disagreeable, but answered:

"He is a navy captain, sah."

"Hal a ship of war has then come into port."

"Who is he, Caesar?"

"Dunno his name, sah."

"Is he one of the officers on the *Southern Station*?"

"Dunno, Massa Gub'n'r."

"Have you ever seen him before?"

"Not to recommember, sah."

"Tell him to call to-morrow, then."

"I thinks he hab important infermashun, sah, from what he hab tell me," volunteered Caesar.

"What did he tell you?"

"He say it was most important dat he see you, sah, ter-night."

"Is he alone?"

"Yas, sah, only himself."

"Then I will see him."

Caesar went off delighted, and a moment after, still enveloped in his cloak, and hat in hand, the stranger was ushered into the presence of the Governor-Commandant.

"Pardon my intrusion, your excellency, but I sought you upon an important matter."

The Governor turned quickly at the words, and the music in the voice, and courteous manner at once impressed him, while he fixed his eyes upon the face of his visitor.

He saw before him a slenderly-formed youth, attired in the dress of a Mexican sea officer, for the cloak was thrown back now from the shoulders, and a face that was pale but certainly effeminate in its beauty.

In spite of his dignity and high rank, he felt an instant respect for his visitor, and answered:

"Be seated, sir, and tell me whom I have the honor of receiving?"

"You may call me Captain Juan, your excellency, until you know me better," was the low reply, and a slight smile hovered about the lips of the speaker.

"It does not augur well, sir, to have to dodge under an assumed name; but of that we will not speak, but of the matter that caused this visit."

"I will not detain you, your excellency, long, so will ask at once if you are willing to commission an officer who pledges himself to procure vessel, arms and crew, to hunt down

and capture the noted rover, Skimmer of the Seas?"

"Hail you do indeed go to the point, sir; but as the Skeleton Schooner, the craft of that notorious pirate, now lies in the river below the town, and her chief has not been heard of since her capture, there is little need of fitting out a vessel to send after him."

"He escaped, you may remember, your excellency."

"So it was believed, while some said he was killed."

"He escaped, your excellency, and is now cruising the Gulf in command of his other vessel."

"Hail to what vessel do you refer?"

"The Red Rover!"

"By Heaven! but the play grows interesting."

"Pray tell me how you know this?"

"I was chased by the Red Rover, and escaped by a ruse only, while I recognized on the deck of the pirate none other than Forrester, the Freebooter."

"You know him then?"

"Yes, your excellency, I knew him when he was known as Captain Frank Forrester, the yachtsman of your city."

"And you are assured that the man you saw on the pirate's deck was this Forrester?"

"I am, sir."

"What vessel were you on?"

"The brig Lioness."

"Hail where is she?"

"In the river, sir, having been detained below, and her captain will report to-morrow the capture of the pirate schooner known as the Scourge of the Coast."

"By the Lord Harry! young gentleman, but you bring good news, for though we knew a pirate schooner had been captured by the crew of the Lioness, it was not known to be the craft of that famous sea devil, Captain Como."

"It was his vessel, sir, as I told you."

"But why do you seek a commission to hunt down this Freebooter Forrester?" and the Governor fastened his piercing eyes more fixedly than ever upon the face of his young visitor.

"My motive, sir, is first, revenge, and second, to bring to justice a red-handed villain who is a curse upon the sea."

"The latter is certainly a most praiseworthy motive, and it is said that revenge is sweet; but pardon me, if I say you seem rather young for a vessel's commander."

"It is not years, sir, that make the man, your excellency," was the quiet reply.

"True; and you say this rover has wronged you?"

"He has wronged me."

"And you ask for a commission to hunt him down?"

"That is all I ask, your excellency," was the modest response.

"And your vessel?"

"As I said, sir, I will procure the vessel, armament and crew; all I ask, sir, is a commission from you to hunt from the high seas, wherever I may find him, Forrester the Freebooter, also known as the Skimmer of the Seas."

"And what if you abuse this right, young sir?"

"Then I make myself liable as a buccaneer."

"By Neptune! I have half a mind to trust you with the paper."

"Do so, your excellency, and I will not give you cause to regret it."

"What if I do not give it to you?"

"Then I shall take my chances and sail without a commission," was the frank reply.

"Then you will be a pirate."

"In name, your excellency, but not in act, and when I have accomplished my purpose, I will have won pardon for sailing without a commission or a flag."

"By the way, what flag will you sail under, for you know my commission is not a national one, and can only be given for you to act as a coast guard against piracy, with the capture of the Freebooter Forrester in view?"

"I know that, sir."

"My flag will be a simple one, sir, only a white hand grasping a hangman's noose, in a field of black."

"A good one, by my faith, but smacking so nearly of the skull and cross-bones in the black flag, you must take care you are not taken for a pirate."

"I will take those chances, your excellency."

"Well, my young friend, I like you, and I shall take the chances of doing right, and give you the paper you ask."

"Thank you, sir."

"Your name, please?" and the Governor seated himself at his desk and seized a quill.

"Make it out, your excellency, in the name of Captain Bess—"

"By heaven! I thought that face was too beautiful for a boy's," and the Governor gave a long whistle; but unmoved the visitor continued:

"Make it out, your excellency, for Captain Bess, of the schooner Lioness of the Sea."

The Governor was silent a moment, and then said in a kindly tone:

"Now that you have confided to me your sex, let me beg that you pause in your desperate undertaking."

"No, your excellency, with or without your commission, my mind is made up as to the course I shall pursue."

"Then you go with my commission, and heaven preserve and give you success."

Ten minutes after Caesar showed Captain Bess out of the door, and, having received an additional souvenir, urged the supposed young man to:

"Draw dat ober-cloak around yer, sah, an' don't cotch cold, fer it am an awful nasty night out ob doors, an' yer doesn't look too strong."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A DEEP-LAID PLOT.

WHEN Captain Bess left the mansion of the governor, she wended her way rapidly through the driving storm to a quarter of the city which bore not the best reputation for morality and honesty.

As though unfamiliar with the locality, she made several inquiries of passers by, and at last stopped before a large mansion built in the Spanish style.

All seemed dark within, but a loud knock brought a man to the door, who gruffly asked:

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Captain Juan," was the reply, and the name seemed an "open sesame," for the door was thrown open, and Bess stepped into the broad hall, while the man bolted and barred the portal behind her as securely as though he expected a visit from burglars.

"Up this way, captain," he said, leading the way up-stairs, and ushering the maiden into a large room back on the second floor.

A bright light was within, and seated at a table, upon which were decanters and glasses, was none other than Raoul Langdon.

At the entrance of Captain Bess he rose politely, and said:

"I am glad to see you, Captain Bess, as I was growing a little nervous about you."

"I was detained some time in looking up the exact locality of the Skeleton Schooner, and finding out if she was fully fitted for sea, and how many crew were on board of her," was the answer.

"I hope you found all to your satisfaction."

"Your remark suggests that you were not pleased with the pirate schooner?"

"I was not; she is good in a light breeze, but is no sea-boat, Captain Bess, and I tried her as thoroughly as I could under the circumstances, according to your directions."

"Well, I am sorry, for I would rather that she would have suited, than to have to cut the schooner out."

"The latter is all we can wish, and if you saw the Governor, as you intended, and succeeded in your desire, we can ask no more."

"I saw the Governor and received the commission."

"I congratulate you."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Langdon; but where is the schooner?"

"I left her with the brig in the little hiding-place, on the river below the city."

"And Lieutenant Harding?"

"Has charge of the brig, as you directed."

"And the men?"

"I sent Binnacle Ben on with a letter to the Senor Pietro, here, and the men have already been enlisted, and as Langdon referred to the one who admitted Captain Bess, as the Senor Pietro, that personage, an evil-faced man, with fierce eyes and a grizzly beard, said in English, but with a slight Spanish accent:

"Yes, Senor Captain, I secured for you just fifty good men, all seamen, and all of them have seen service."

"Most of them doubtless upon pirate

decks?" said Captain Bess, with some sarcasm of tones.

"Many of them have been unfortunate in life, captain, and thus necessity has made them sailors of fortune," was the cautious reply.

"Well, so they are good men, seamen, and not actual cutthroats, I care not," was Bessie's indifferent reply.

"Ah, no, Senor Captain."

"I have secured men for the Skimmer of the Seas, as the Senor Don knows, for he came to me to enlarge his crew, and brought a letter from the chief; but I have men for different purposes, and you desiring, so Senor Don told me, those who were not of the worst character, I selected those of the best, and the bill is just ten pesos per man."

"Ah, yes, I will pay it you; but where are the men?"

"In a *cafe*, Senor Captain, awaiting your command."

"You have seen them, Lieutenant Langdon?"

"Yes, Captain Bess."

"And your opinion of them?"

"Far above the average, as seamen go."

"Enough; here, Senor Pietro, is your gold, just five hundred dollars," and Captain Bess took just that amount from her purse and handed it to the delighted Spaniard.

"Now, lieutenant, as I find that one person I was most anxious to see is not in the city just now, I am ready to start at once, so, if the Senor Pietro will take us to where the men are to be found, we will start."

"Certainly, senor captain; the *cafe* is but a stone's throw from where the Skeleton Schooner lies."

"I will get my cloak, and be at once ready," and a few moments after the three left the old mansion and wended their way through the deserted streets, to carry out the bold plot which Captain Bess had formed of running off with the Skeleton Schooner.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A MYSTERY SOLVED.

THE Skeleton Schooner, after its capture by Percy Wyndham, was at once ordered to the dock by the admiral of the station, who was then in port, and it underwent a most thorough overhauling.

The very day before the visit of Captain Bess to the Governor-Commandant, the schooner's repairs had been completed, and stores had been put on board, the magazine supplied, and all made ready for a cruise as soon as the fleet should return to port and officers could be selected to command her and a crew detailed to her.

In the mean time she had been left under the immediate charge of a young midddy, a marine lieutenant and four marines, and the two former were enjoying themselves in the cabin over a game of cards, with two boon companions, scions of aristocratic families in the city, while upon the vessel were then moving half a hundred gallant tars, ready for any expedition of daring.

The marines, little dreaming of danger, had followed the example of their superiors, and were engaged in gambling in the steerage, and happy in being able to escape the driving rain and bleak wind.

The schooner had been hauled off in the stream that very day, just her own length from the shore, and swung to one anchor, while all on board was in perfect trim, and those in cabin and steerage little recked the storm without.

But there were those who boldly faced the driving rain and bleak wind, and out from the dark shore suddenly shot four boats crowded with men.

The oars were muffled, and they reached the side of the schooner and clambered on board without disturbing the gambling guards.

The boats then returned shoreward with but one man each to handle the oars, and a slender form, enveloped in a cloak and followed by four others, moved toward the cabin, out of the companionway of which streamed a light.

Down the companionway he stepped, and a pleasant scene met his gaze.

The cabin was luxuriously furnished; in fact, the same beautiful furniture which the Skimmer of the Sea had placed there, had been retained.

At the table sat four young gentlemen, one in midshipman's uniform, another in a marine officer's dress, and two in civilian's clothes.

Before them upon the table were decanters

of liquor and wine, cigars scattered here and there, and they were all deeply interested in a game of cards, and no wonder, for the stakes of gold, piled up by each, were of no inconsiderable amount.

"Gentlemen, I dislike to interrupt your interesting game, but I have higher stakes to play for."

The voice fairly smote their ears, and turning in alarm they saw, as they supposed, a handsome youth confronting them, dressed in a gorgeous uniform, and holding in one hand a pistol, in the other a sword.

Half-springing to their feet they gazed upon the intruder, while the midshipman, with intoxicated dignity demanded:

"Who are you, sir, that dares intrude upon this vessel?"

The handsome intruder answered sternly:

"I am Captain Bess, and this schooner is my prize."

"Never!" cried the really gallant young middy, and he sprung for his sword, and the marine officer did likewise; but seizing their weapons they turned to see themselves covered by a quartette of muskets, while Captain Bess said calmly:

"Keep cool, gentlemen, for you are my prisoners, and this vessel is now in my power."

"Make the slightest resistance and you shall rue it; but surrender quietly, and within this hour you shall be free."

The surprised officers saw that resistance would be utterly useless, for besides their handsome captor, and the four men who barred the companionway, they heard many feet upon the deck above, and, making a virtue of necessity, they surrendered at discretion, to find that the schooner was already under way, flying down the river before the stiff breeze that was blowing.

Past the lights of the town she sped, by vessels at anchor in the stream, and soon had dropped all astern on her flight toward the Gulf.

After an hour's run she glided close in toward the starboard shore, and luffing up dropped anchor.

"Now, gentlemen, I will trouble you to accompany me," said Captain Bess, and the two officers and their companions silently followed her into a boat, while the quartette of marines, who had been equally surprised with their superiors, entered a second boat, at the tiller of which sat Binnacle Ben.

Off through the darkness they rowed, and into a bayou, which soon led into a large basin, washed out in the high water of an overflow.

To the surprise of the prisoners they beheld in this basin two vessels, at anchor, one a large brig, the other a small schooner.

Boarding the latter, Captain Bess said, addressing the midshipman:

"Now, sir, I leave you and your companions in charge of this vessel, which I give you in exchange for the Skeleton Schooner."

"It is the craft known as the Scourge of the Coast, and with dawn you can run it up to the city, along with yonder brig, which is the Lioness."

"Gentlemen, I bid you good-night." In vain the middy called to his captor, desiring to make inquiries of him, for Captain Bess sprung into the boat and was rowed away, and Binnacle Ben following her example, the same party taken from the Skeleton Schooner were left on board the little Scourge of the Coast.

Straight to the brig went Captain Bess, and upon ascending to the deck was met by Henry Harding.

"Well, captain, I hope success has greeted you?" said the young lieutenant.

"Yes, thank you; but now bring the brig's captain before me, and then get out men into the boats alongside as quickly as possible."

The order was promptly obeyed, and when the captain of the brig confronted her, Bessie said, in the terse way which she had assumed since her new venture in life:

"Captain, I keep my promise, by to-night releasing you and your vessel, and you can either run up to the city to-night, or in the morning."

"The schooner yonder I leave in charge of a young midshipman, whose craft I took from him; but it is your prize, and as such may serve as a solace for yourself and men for your capture and confinement."

"Good-night, captain, and a pleasant voyage through life."

As she finished speaking, Captain Bess turned away, but springing after her the commander of the brig seized her hand and said, earnestly, and in his blunt way:

"Young man, or woman, for I'm blest if I know which you are, I just want to say that you have acted well with me and mine, and if ever you need a true friend, buccaneer though you may be, don't hesitate to call upon me, for one who serves me I never forget."

Captain Bess thanked him, and hastening over the side, whither her men had already preceded her, she gave the order to start, and the two boats pulled away in the darkness, while the brig's captain ran to assure all on board, and to tell them that they were out of the hands of the Philistines in safety.

And while they were rejoicing and praying at their good fortune, and the middy and his friends were cursing their ill fortune, the Skeleton Schooner was flying down the Mississippi toward the Gulf of Mexico, to follow in the wake of a strange destiny, and the next day the Crescent City was alive with excitement, for the mystery of the delay of the brig Lioness was solved.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LAYING THE CORNER-STONE OF VILLAINY.

WHEN Mark Mortimer sailed away from the Everglades, the night on which he took the life of Juan Gito, he was in no amiable mood.

Not that his conscience troubled him for his murderous act, for that he did not heed, other than death had silenced forever a tongue that could have told ugly secrets of his.

He did not like the change that had come over his sister.

Prior to his father's death, she had been his best friend, and besides a good and loving sister.

Often she had helped him out of his financial difficulties by giving her pin money, and many of his stories about aiding friends in misfortune she had believed.

When left, by their father's death, wholly to the guardianship of her brother, it had not taken Mabel long to find out that he was sordid, scheming and cold-blooded, and, young as she was, she soon felt that he was building himself up at her sacrifice, for she saw through his plot to make her the wife of his intimate friend, the pretended yachtman, Frank Forrester, whom Percy Wyndham had so cleverly proven a gambler pirate, and torn the mask off of his villainies, causing him to have to fly for safety to his own outlaw deck.

And this man Mark Mortimer had wanted his sister to marry, and she had consented, for she had loved no one, and wished to check in her heart the germ of a love she dared not cherish.

But Mabel looked closely into the matter, went over all her father's papers, and accidentally found a note of her brother's to Frank Forrester for many thousands, and which had been marked "paid."

She knew her brother was then in distress for funds, had received no large sums, and yet this note was marked paid the very day on which she had become engaged to Frank Forrester, and when that personage was the guest of The Everglades.

This looked like a regular sale of her hand, in payment of the note, and putting her faithful quadroon maid, Fidele, upon the scent, that very knowing and cunning girl soon ferreted out other suspicious circumstances, which gave Mabel ample cause for thought of a painful nature.

Her father's will was so made that she was heiress to all, The Everglades, negroes, and property in New Orleans, for before the death of Major Mortimer he had advanced to his son his fortune, and it had gone in gambling.

The world, however, did not know this, and Mark Mortimer was considered co-heir with his sister, and consequently was believed to be a very rich young man.

But with all his faults Major Mortimer had loved his son, who had been named for him, and strange to say, had left him the heir of his sister's inheritance, in case of her death, and moreover, had left her to his guardianship, which prevented her marriage without his consent.

With such authority, Mabel felt that she was in his power; but she had boldly defied him, when, after Percy Wyndham had daringly rescued her from the kidnappers, and lay wounded and unconscious before them, her

brother had seemed to wish there to end the life of her preserver, because he was his foe.

She had again defied him when her brother sought to arrest Percy Wyndham, and Mark Mortimer, knowing her to have witnessed the killing of Juan Gito by him, felt that he was at her mercy, and hence it was, as his yacht sailed away from The Everglades, that he paced the deck in moody silence, and in no enviable frame of mind.

He knew well that, unless his sister spoke, the fact of Juan Gito coming to his house and entering his library secretly, and, as he had said, attacking him, would be believed, and the authorities would not move in the matter.

But he also knew that in killing the cliff fisherman, he had antagonized his class of comrades along the coast, and that he must be on his guard, that they did not avenge his death.

As for poor Bessie, he hardly gave a thought to her, little dreaming that one of her sweet nature was as revengeful as an Indian, when aroused to antagonism.

Then, too, he could not but consider what Percy Wyndham might think of the matter.

He had longed for a meeting with Percy Wyndham in the *duello*, and had publicly insulted him to force that meeting, for the master of Lakelands, having twice saved the life of Mabel, Mark Mortimer felt that he had learned to love his sister, in spite of the vendetta between the families, and hence would not meet him.

But not only, when insulted by Mark Mortimer, had Percy Wyndham granted that meeting, but he had also arranged a surprise for his adversary, in defeating him, and having Bessie Gito appear upon the scene, and forcing him, at the point of the sword, then to offer her reparation for his mock marriage to her, by being united by a priest upon the spot.

All these things did Mark Mortimer brood over; and he thirsted for revenge against Percy Wyndham, but perfectly well understood that he dared not attempt a second duel with him.

For the present, after his arrival in New Orleans, he knew that it behooved him to go cautiously, for the exposure of Frank Forrester, as a pirate, and as being none other than Forrester, the Freebooter, would reflect upon him in many mines, as he was most intimate with him.

But then, so were many others, and Forrester had been the pet of society in some circles, and Mark Mortimer hoped that he, with others, would be only put up among the laughing stock.

In his heart he really did not know that Forrester was other than a professional gambler, though he had, on several occasions, seen circumstances of a suspicious nature, for which he could not account.

After a rapid run, he arrived in the city, and at once took up his quarters in a fashionable part of the town, furnishing his apartments elegantly, and giving to all of his intimates the impression that he intended to spend some time in the city.

He was rallied by many, upon having been the intimate companion of a pirate; but he was loudest in his denunciation of Forrester, and was delighted to find that he was not suspected of being an accomplice.

Having gotten settled in his new quarters, he at once set about the formation of a plot, that he hoped would let him out of all of his difficulties, and bring him ample revenge and the fortune he so much coveted.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MARK MORTIMER'S PLOT.

THE evil-hearted young aristocrat, whom all looked upon as the master of The Everglades, sat alone in his rooms.

He had refused himself to all visitors, and yet awaited with impatience the coming of one with whom he had an appointment.

He was in a pleasant humor with himself, for he had won quite a large sum the night before, and some one had told him that he was looked upon as a hero, for having so promptly called out and shot the father of the young man who shot his father, though the informant did not make known how those admirers reconciled the idea of seeking revenge against the wrong man.

He had heard nothing of his duel with Percy Wyndham, other than that it had been a drawn battle, and he cared not to make known the real truth of the affair, of how his adversary had defeated and humbled him.

His rooms were luxurious; he had a negro valet to attend his wants, and all he needed was the aid of a bold, bad villain to act as his tool, to make him a happy man in his own estimation.

Suddenly upon his reveries broke an intruder.

It was Jeff, his valet.

"He am come, Mars' Mark," he said.

"Who has come?"

"The one you wants to see, sah."

"Did he give you his name?"

"Yas, sah, fer dat is how I recognize him, sah."

"What name did he give you?"

"Senor Peto."

"Ab! admit him."

Jeff departed, but soon returned, and accompanying him was the Senor Pietro, whom the reader has met before, as the one who procured the crew for Captain Bess, though at that time he had not been called upon to perform that service, the brig *Lioness*, with her girl commander, not having yet arrived in port.

"The Senor Mark Mortimer!" said Pietro, inquiringly, as he entered.

"Yes. Do I address the Senor Pietro?"

"You do."

"Here, Jeff, you can go out for an hour if you wish to," and Mark Mortimer tossed his delighted valet a piece of gold.

"Now, Senor Pietro, you can state why I am honored with this visit?" and Mark Mortimer turned his gaze full upon his visitor.

"You asked a gambler friend to name a man who could do some work for you, I believe?"

"I did."

"He named Senor Pietro?"

"He did."

"You asked him to send him to you to-night?"

"True."

"I have come, for I am Senor Pietro, and I will undertake your work."

"Without knowing what it is?"

"Yes."

"It may cost you your life."

"I take all chances for gold."

"It may be red work."

"It cannot be redder work than I have done."

"It may be to kill."

"I am not afraid to kill."

"A woman, perhaps?"

"A life is all the same to me."

"Well, I guess you will do," said Mark Mortimer, with a shudder at the cool villainy of the man.

"I will do anything for gold," was the calm response.

"Lie, kill, steal, or—"

"Or anything I am paid for."

"You certainly are a villain, Senor Pietro."

"No more than the man who pays me to do the work he is too cowardly to attempt," was the quick retort.

Mark Mortimer's face flushed crimson, and his impulse was to spring upon the man before him; but the very devilish nature of the man told him that he was just the one he wanted to aid him, and he answered:

"Well, I'll not quarrel with you, Pietro, for I confess I do not care to do the work myself, so shall hire you."

"Gold makes me a willing tool."

"You shall have it."

"Now to work."

"I am ready, senor."

"You know who I am?"

"I do."

"I am said to be rich."

"Very rich, I have heard."

"I am not worth ten thousand dollars to-night."

"Then, if you cannot pay me, senor, I will depart."

"Unless a certain person dies."

"Ab!"

"Yes, if one person is dead, I am a very rich man."

"Then, why not remove that person?"

"That is just what I wish do."

"Or hire me to do."

"Well, senor, name the block in your way, and I will remove it."

"It is a woman."

"It is immaterial."

"My sister."

"You have to mourn, not I, senor."

"She is at her plantation home, The Everglades."

"I will go there and kill her."

"No; she must be enticed here."

"How, senor?"

"My yacht lies at the Lake, and my idea was to have you go to The Everglades, as though to see me, and while awaiting me there, my yacht would arrive, and the negroes report to my sister that I was very ill and had sent for her."

"You can take advantage of her coming to accompany her, and watching your chance, hurl her into the sea by night."

"A good idea, senor."

"And you will undertake it?"

"Certainly, senor, with pleasure."

"Then that is arranged."

"When the gold amount is fixed, yes."

"We will talk of that afterward, for I have more work for you."

"You have but to command and pay, senor."

"You have heard of Percy Wyndham?"

"The gentleman you shot in a duel?"

"No; his son."

"Oh yes, the gallant young man who captured the pirate craft known as the *Skeleton Schooner*?"

"Yes."

"I have heard much of him, senor."

"Well, he is my foe."

"You mean you want him removed?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"As soon as you can remove him."

"He lives near you, on the coast?"

"He does, at Lakelands, his plantation."

"On the water?"

"Yes, not two hundred yards from the shore."

"That will be easy to do."

"Mind you, if he is simply killed, by no one knows who, suspicion *might* fall upon me."

"But if a vessel were to put into his harbor some night, rob his house and kill him, then, you know, it would all be laid to pirates."

"True, and a good idea, senor."

"You should have been poor, so, like me, you could make your daily bread as a hired assassin like me."

Again did Mark Mortimer feel like springing upon the man; but he wisely refrained and only answered with sarcasm:

"I feel honored by your opinion of me."

"Your talent for evil prompts it, senor; but when do you wish your friend, or rather your foe, to die?"

"As soon as you can act in the matter, so name your price."

"First, we will consider the killing of your sister," coolly said the wretch.

"Well?"

"How much do you inherit by her death?"

"You are insolent, sir."

"No, for I must have a basis to work upon."

"How mean you?"

"If you get a large fortune, my fee is large."

"If an ordinary sum, then I can only charge accordingly."

"Ah! well, I get a fair fortune, so name your price."

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Bah! are you a fool, man?"

"Not such a fool as you may take me for, Senor Mortimer."

"Ten thousand dollars! Why, that sum is preposterous."

"You win that much at cards sometimes."

"True, but I will not give it to you."

"Very well, get another tool to do your work."

"Call it five, and I will pay it."

"I have but one price, senor."

"And do you intend to charge me the same sum for killing Percy Wyndham?"

"No, for you get no gold by that transaction, only revenge, as I understand it."

"Well, name your price for that work."

"He has plenty of plate in the mansion?"

"So I am told."

"And jewels?"

"Yes."

"Well, pay the charter money for the vessel, the crew, with a hundred apiece for the men, and make it a thousand for me, and I'll do the work."

"I'll give you two thousand for the work, and pay you half of the gold down for each agreement."

"When will you pay the balance?"

"Upon demand, when the work is done."

"Enough, let me have the six thousand now."

The money was counted out and handed to the assassin, who at once took his departure.

Soon after Jeff returned, and he at once received orders to go after a young physician, whom his master had often befriended, and then to give out to all callers, that Mr. Mark Mortimer was lying dangerously ill, and could see no one but his doctor—and thus began the plot against Mabel Mortimer and Percy Wyndham.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

PIETRO'S PLOT.

WHEN Pietro the assassin returned to his antiquated quarters, in a disreputable part of the city, he at once sent a servant for a man who frequently aided him in his devilish work.

Now the Senor Pietro was an Italian, but claimed to be a Spaniard, and spoke the latter language as fluently as though he had been to the manner born.

In Italy he had been a noble, by birth, but an assassin by nature, and the result was he gratified a petty revenge upon a rival, and had to fly to the mountains to save his life, where he took to robbing travelers as a means of subsistence.

Drifting into Spain, he from thence came to America, and though he landed a pauper, he soon accumulated a goodly sum from plying his evil calling, that of robbery, in New Orleans.

With ambition to rise in his profession, he bought him the old mansion, and letting it be known that he could be bought to do deadly work, soon had plenty of customers, none of whom had any cause to complain that he did not give entire satisfaction.

To add to his golden revenues he also became the recipient of smuggled goods, and from that drifted into securing crews for pirate vessels, and in his nefarious trade had enriched himself.

Thus the reader will see that Mark Mortimer had hit upon the very person to do his red work for him.

Upon the arrival of the man for whom Pietro had sent, he was shown up to the host's private rooms, and was made welcome with a bottle of good wine.

"Well, senor, what is it now?" asked the visitor, who was a dark-faced man, and one of the worst types of creoles in the city.

"I want a most delicate matter attended to, Conrad."

"Yes, senor."

"A woman is to be killed."

"Of course."

"She is to be put out of the way, you know, so that a rival may have full sway."

"Of course, senor."

"She is to be gotten rid of in a peculiar way."

"Of course."

"You are to go to her home, and ask to see her brother."

"If he is there, you know, then seek a situation as overseer with him; but I will see that he will be kept away, and I am only advising you against accident."

"Of course."

"Just tell his sister that you will await his coming, and about that time a yacht will arrive with information that the lady's brother is very ill in New Orleans, and begging her to go to him."

"You beg like a pauper to go on the yacht, and on the way over, the first chance you get throw her into the sea."

"Of course."

"That is your work to do."

"I see, senor."

"Name your price."

"I'll name high, senor."

"Why?"

"Because the chances are against me."

"Bah! it will be easy to accomplish."

"Well, I have another reason."

"Name it."

"It's a woman I am to kill."

"Ha! ha! ha! you who killed your wife, hesitate to kill a strange woman."

"It's because I killed a woman once I hesitate to do it again, Senor Pietro."

"A man is different, but a woman, no, no!"

"Then I will get Rudolph."

"No, I did not say I would not do it, only I needed a good price to ease my conscience."

"What price?"

"A couple of thousand."

"You are a fool, for money is not so plenty."

"Well, what will you give?"

"It is not what I'll give, but the party I act for."

"I am promised fifteen hundred, and I give you a thousand to do it."

"And if I get caught in the act?"

"I'll buy you out of the calabos."

"Done!"

"Then you will undertake it?"

"At once."

"You are wise, for a thousand dollars are not made so easily nowadays."

"When do I start, and who is the woman?"

"I'll give you full particulars; but I have more work for you."

"I am ready."

"You are a sailor?"

"Yes, senior, I was a pirate for five years."

"Good! then you could take command of a small vessel to run along the coast?"

"I can."

"Can you get a dozen good men?"

"So many?"

"Why you will need them, as there are negroes at the place, where you are to go, who may defend it."

"Bah! half a dozen can keep them at bay, and a dozen only make the profits smaller."

"Well, get six besides yourself, secure a small, swift-sailing craft, go thoroughly armed, and land by night at the Lakelands plantation—"

"The home of the Wyndhams?"

"Yes."

"I know it."

"Well, land there, attack it, kill its young master, Percy Wyndham, sack the place, return to me with the booty, and mind you, there is plenty of silver plate there, and I will pay the charter of the craft, give each of your crew fifty dollars, and ten per cent of the loot money, and you shall have five hundred, and a share in what the sale of the plunder brings."

"That young man is a dangerous person to attack."

"Then take more men."

"I guess it would be safer, and if I get some of them killed in the *melee* you will give me their shares?"

"Yes, you greedy fellow."

"I'm getting old, Senor Pietro, and must lay by for a rainy day."

"You'll not need it, for you'll be hanged."

"I wouldn't be surprised," was the philosophical response, and half an hour after Monsieur Conrad, the Creole, departed upon his mission of guilt, leaving the Senor Pietro well pleased with the arrangement of his little plot.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

CONRAD, THE CREOLE.

A MAN stood on a low point of land, a few leagues from the plantation of Lakelands, sweeping the horizon with his glass.

A lugger, evidently a coast trader, had dropped him a mile off-shore in a small boat, and while it continued on its way, he rowed to the land.

He had been there a couple of hours when he suddenly exclaimed:

"There it comes now."

Instantly he went to the boat lying on the beach and sprung in, though to the naked eye, what had attracted his attention, and what he had referred to was not visible.

Rapidly he rowed out from the shore, never stopping until miles lay between him and the land.

Then he halted, and again raised his glass to his eye, and bent it upon a sail now visible without that aid.

"Yes, it is the yacht," he muttered.

Instantly he took up a rope, and binding his two oars together, then attached to them several heavy pieces of iron that served as ballast.

Then he lowered his oars into the water, and discovering that the iron was not sufficient to sink them, tied on another piece.

"Ah! that will do," he muttered, and he tied the rope, which kept them from sinking, to the rowlock, saying, grimly:

"I'll not let go my clutch on them until I am certain the yacht will pick me up, for I don't like the appearance of the skies, and storms are common in this latitude at this season."

He then seemed to disarrange his toilet, assumed a woe-begone look, and standing up, as the sail drew nearer, shouted and waved his

The vessel was a sloop yacht, such a one as were used in those days by the planters along the coast, in going with their families to and from the ports.

It changed its course upon discovering him, and seeing this he let go the rope that held the oars, and they sunk from sight.

Soon the yacht luffed up near, and only black faces were seen on board.

"Well, my boys, thank God you have come, for I am a shipwrecked sailor," he cried.

"Is that so, massa? Den we mighty glad we come too, sah."

"Jist catch dis line and come on board," said an honest-faced negro, who held the tiller.

"Thank you, my man."

"Save the boat, for I give it you, as it is all I have to offer," and the man sprang on the deck of the yacht.

"We don't want nuffin', massa, fer pickin' yer up in distress."

"Whar does yer lib?"

"In New Orleans; and my vessel was wrecked in the storm some time ago, and I have been drifting ever since."

"But I had provisions and made myself comfortable."

"Yas, massa, yer doesn't look like yer had been starved."

"No; but where are you bound?"

"We belongs at The Everglades, massa."

"Where is that?"

"It am de Mortimer Plantation, sah; yer kin jist see it yonder—not dere, sar, for dat am Lakelands, de Wyndham Plantation, sah, but over dere you see our home."

"Ah, yes; but can I get a chance to return to the city from there soon?"

"Yas, massa, for we has comed arter mistis, as master am sick in de city, and we will go right back."

"Praise Heaven for that, for I shall then soon be able to see my dear old mother's face, for she fears I am drowned."

"Yas, massa, I guesses it'll tickle her mightily to see yer."

"But don't yer want a leetle suthin', massa, for we has der keys o' der wine locker, for master an' mistis allus trusts us."

The shipwrecked mariner did want a "leetle suthin'" and took a drink that surprised the sober crew of the yacht for its quantity.

"Goodness golly! that would upset dis chile clean ober," said one, *sotto voce*.

And on the yacht went, and soon after came to anchor in the harbor of The Everglades.

Up to the mansion went the negro sailing-master to report to Mabel, and the shipwrecked sailor accompanied him.

The maiden sat on the piazza, watching their approach with curiosity.

She looked pale, and wore a troubled expression, for she was worried about her erring brother, and also poor Bessie Gito, whose departure from her home, several days before, she had heard of.

"Has anything happened?" she asked, quickly rising as the negro approached, and she saw that he wore a troubled look.

"No, mistis, only master am quite sick an' sent us ter bring yer ter ons't."

"Is he ill or wounded?" asked Mabel, remembering Bessie's mysterious departure, and that Percy Wyndham had also had time to reach New Orleans, and the yacht to get back.

"No, mistis, he hain't been hurted, but he am werry sick, Caesar tole us, and he want you to come right away."

"I will get ready at once; but who is this—" gentleman, Mabel was going to say, but, with a high appreciation of a gentleman, upon a second glance at the man, her tongue would not utter the word, and she said:

"This person?"

"I am a poor shipwrecked mariner, lady, whom your yacht picked up at sea, and I hoped that you would be good enough to allow me to return with you to the city, for my poor old mother longs to see her long-absent son."

Mabel's heart was touched, and instantly she treated the man with marked kindness, ordering Duke to spread before him a substantial repast and add to his limited wardrobe with some of his master's clothing.

"And then, Duke, get ready to accompany me, for your master is ill, and you are a good nurse," she ordered.

Half an hour after Mabel went on board, accompanied by her maid, Fidele, Duke and the stranger, and once more the yacht spread her wings to fly across the waters.

Dark clouds were scurrying across the skies,

and an inky mass obscured the setting sun, which gave promise of a blustering night.

But Mabel had confidence in her sable crew, which was added to by the fact that the shipwrecked sailor told her he had been captain of a large vessel, and, anxious about her brother, in spite of his evil ways not wishing him to die without her by his side, she determined to go notwithstanding the threatening weather.

With the darkness the wind increased, and, so quietly did the stranger perform many little acts, that all felt confidence in him, and before long he held the tiller, while the negroes went forward, most willing to trust him under the circumstances.

Unable to sleep, Mabel sent Fidele into the little cabin to bed, and seated herself near the helmsman, who certainly showed himself a thorough sailor.

Seeing that the storm had swept over, though half a gale was blowing and the sea running high, the negro crew settled themselves as best they could, for the shipwrecked mariner told them he would keep the helm until after midnight, and soon all was quiet on the little vessel, except when now and then a wave would fall on board with a heavy thud, and the winds whistled more savagely through the rigging.

Suddenly turning to Mabel, the unknown helmsman said:

"Miss Mortimer, will you take the glass and see if that is a vessel astern?"

Mabel took the glass, placed it to her eye, and just then the yacht lurched, a sea came on board, and when the volume of water had tumbled off the maiden had disappeared.

On flew the yacht, the man still at the helm and giving no cry of alarm until minutes have passed.

Then he muttered:

"Now, Conrad the Creole, your gold is won, and you have nothing to fear."

Watching his chance, he caught a large wave over the bows, and when it had passed gave a ringing cry of alarm.

Instantly all was wild excitement on board the yacht, which was at once luffed up into the wind and lay to, while every eye scanned the wild waters for the missing maiden.

But without result, and, after a cruising about fruitlessly for an hour the surviving negroes decided to continue on to New Orleans and report the sad tidings to their master.

And on sped the yacht once more, the wailing of the negroes, who had dearly loved their young mistress, mingling with the moaning of the winds, while the grim murderer at the helm muttered to himself, as though it were a pleasant thought to dwell upon:

"Conrad the Creole, you have won your gold, and the Senor Pietro will say that you have done well."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE.

WHEN Mabel Mortimer raised the glass to her eyes, to look for the sail astern, she had not the slightest suspicion of evil, until she felt herself seized in a powerful grip and hurled headlong into the sea.

She was so amazed that she had not even cried out, and down into the dark waters she sunk, which effectually prevented a call for help when she thought of giving an alarm.

When she arose to the surface she saw the yacht bounding away like the wind, and quite a distance off.

But she summoned up strength and loudly her clear voice rung out over the waters, in the hope that some one of the crew would hear her.

But no, the wind blew the cry back into her teeth, and on sped the yacht.

Mabel Mortimer was no coward; but alone in these wild waters, with certain death staring her in the face, it was no wonder that all hope sunk within her, and despair clutched her heart.

She knew that the man had thrown her into the sea, for she saw him rise from the tiller, felt his grasp upon her lips and his grip around her waist, as he raised her in his strong arms and hurled her headlong into the waters.

Then she knew that she was the victim of another plot, but by whom plotted she dared not think.

Up to her mind, even in that awful minute, came the memory of the time she had been kidnapped when visiting her father's grave, and her rescue by Percy Wyndham.

Again flashed before her mind the remem-

brance of her awful scene with another kidnapper, when Percy Wyndham was once more her rescuer, and saved her from death.

But now where was that bold man who was the foe of her name?

No hope could there be for her now, and she gave up to despair.

A good swimmer, though without a thought that it would serve her, poor Mabel kept herself above the waters, buffeted rudely about, and with only darkness around her, and the darkness of death threatening to close over her every instant.

Suddenly she brushed the salt spray from her eyes and stared before her.

Was it a huge fish that she saw springing above the waves?

No, it was a boat.

A shout of joy arose to her lips, but the waves washed over her and smothered it.

Again she rose, and the object that had attracted her attention was nearer.

It was indeed a boat.

But mastless, seemingly crewless, and a floating wreck upon the waters.

With tremendous exertion she managed to reach its side, as it was borne by, and clutching at it convulsively, her hand caught a rope.

Then she drew herself nearer, grasped the coamings, and with a mighty effort drew herself upon the deck, and staggering to the cockpit, threw herself in it with a fervent groan of thankfulness.

What mattered it that the bulk was crewless, mastless, a waif upon the waves, and the cockpit full of water?

To her it was a refuge, a haven of safety, and she felt that she was safe.

"I will not die, for Heaven has not given me this hope, raised me from despair, to let me perish now," she murmured.

And all night long she clung to the coamings that encircled the cockpit, and hoped and prayed, for she well knew that her danger was desperate.

But at last the dawn came, and she looked about her.

Her boat was the wreck of a small sailing craft of four tons, but though water-logged, seemed yet buoyant.

In the small cabin, drenched with the waves, she saw provisions and clothing, so that she need not starve, and once the wind went down, she could make herself comparatively comfortable.

From her investigation of her little barque, which she loved as the preserver of her life, she cast her eyes out over the waters, to start and give vent to an exclamation of surprise and joy commingled.

There, not a quarter of a mile distant, and coming directly toward her, was a large sloop yacht.

That she was seen was evident, for several forms stood on the yacht's fore-castle gazing earnestly at the wreck.

And, while she looked, there came slowly from her lips the words:

"Saved a third time by Percy Wyndham, for that is his vessel, the Jack-o'-lantern, and I see him now, standing by the mast.

"Oh, Holy Mother! what does this mean?

"What strange fatality in life causes us to meet?

"What mysterious fate makes me owe to that man, whose hand is stained with my father's blood, my life?"

She bowed her head in her hands, and raised it only when Percy Wyndham sprung upon the deck of the little wreck, and, recognizing her cried:

"Good God! you here, Mabel Mortimer?"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS.

NEW ORLEANS was greatly excited over several circumstances, that were certainly calculated to set the good citizens all agog, for scenes of an important and mysterious character came in like a tidal wave.

In the first place, the brig *Lioness* came to her anchorage at an early hour the morning after her captain had resumed command, and at once went forth the startling tidings of her adventures during the voyage over, from her capture by a horde of pirates, to the taking command of her by a youth, who afterward proved a woman.

The *Skeleton Schooner* had also disappeared in a most miraculous manner, and in its place was anchored a small schooner, which was known as the *Scourge of the Coast*, and which,

also, had been captured by the very young buccaneer who had returned the *Lioness* to her captain, let the vessel and her passengers go unrobbed, and then had saved the clipper ship from the pirates.

This remarkable course of a buccaneer seemed contradictory; but then it was better understood as the very thing that ought to have been done under the circumstances, so said the wisacres, when it was taken into consideration that the buccaneer was a woman, and, consequently, entitled to be in some particular like her sex.

The midshipman on board the schooner, in the absence of the admiral with the fleet, made his report of what had happened, to the Governor Commandant.

He however forgot to state that both officers and crew were below decks, dodging the rain, and enjoying a game of cards, for high stakes in the cabin, for low stakes in the fore-castle.

He simply stated that he was surprised at the coming on board of the boat, but was unable to keep them off, and hence the capture of the schooner.

The Governor seemed deeply interested, asked any number of questions about the daring Captain Bess, and told the midshipman to retain command of the little schooner until the return of the admiral.

But after the departure of the midshipman, the Governor laughed heartily, and said to himself:

"Well, that was a clever trick to play.

"She said she would secure the vessel, armament and crew, and in faith, she has done so, and I expect to hear good tidings of the girl.

"She certainly is no pirate at heart, for she acted most handsomely with the brig *Lioness* and her captain, and saved the clipper ship from capture by that accursed *Scourge of the Coast*.

"Well, we shall see, we shall see," and the Governor continued his pondering over all that had happened, and made up his mind to keep secret the fact of his having commissioned a person who was now getting the name in the city as *Buccaneer Bess*.

On the top of all this exciting news, the yacht belonging to The Everglades arrived at the lake shore, and her negro sailing-master made the report to his master, who it was said was lying dangerously ill at his rooms, that his sister, in coming to the city to nurse her brother, had insisted upon remaining on deck in a blow, and, in an unguarded moment, had been washed overboard and lost.

The shock of this new, it was said, well-nigh cost Mark Mortimer his life, and his physician refused to permit even his most intimate friends to see him.

Of course the loss of a beauty and an heiress caused a feeling of gloom to pervade the city, and many were those who deeply sympathized with the poor brother, who, by his sister's sad loss was left the last of his race.

Back to The Everglades the yacht was sent with her negro crew, and the almost broken-hearted Fidele, while Duke, the faithful mulatto, remained to nurse his master back to life.

Hardly was this sad story going the rounds, when the Jack-o'-lantern arrived in port.

All knew that famous craft by name, for had it not been the yacht of the notorious Forrester the Freebooter, who had so cleverly deceived the citizens of the Crescent City?

And wasn't she first supposed to be a smuggler craft, and reported as purchased by Forrester as his yacht, when in reality she was plying her calling as a pirate?

Then she had been taken by Percy Wyndham as his own vessel, after he had daringly captured the *Skeleton Schooner*, and hence, with such a history as had the Jack-o'-lantern, it was no wonder that her arrival created an additional stir in the circle of gossipers.

But when it became known that Percy Wyndham reported that the day he had sailed from his plantation, he had sighted a craft, recognized to be none other than the famous schooner known as the *Red Rover*, and had been chased by her, and only escaped by running inshore and hiding in the bayous, excitement again rose to a fever heat, and the climax was reached when the young planter yachtsman made known the fact, that, on board the *Red Rover*, he had distinctly recognized none other than Forrester the Freebooter.

He knew Forrester too well to mistake him,

he had recognized him with the naked eye, and confirmed that recognition with his glass, and vouched for the fact that the *Skimmer of the Seas*, though deprived of the *Skeleton Schooner*, was again afloat under his black flag, to leave another red trail through the waters of the Gulf.

Several days after the arrival of the Jack-o'-lantern in port, her master was seen to go hurriedly on board of her one day and at once set sail, and thus it was that wheels within wheels were working toward a certain end.

CHAPTER XL.

THE MYSTERIOUS LUGGER.

"MASTER, does yer notice nuthin' suspicious 'bout that lugger, sah?"

It was Caleb that asked the question; the faithful sailing-master of Lakelands, whom Captain Wyndham, and after him young Percy, had full confidence in as slave, friend and sailor, for he could handle anything from a sail-boat to a clipper ship.

It was the morning after the Jack-o'-lantern had sailed from New Orleans, and her course lay toward Lake lands, and master and slave stood together, the latter at the helm, as the yacht swept along under a six knot breeze.

"I do notice something suspicious about her, Caleb; but tell me what particular thing it is that has attracted your attention?" returned Percy Wyndham.

"You see, sah, though she look a leetle clumsy, she do sail well?"

"Yes."

"She holdin' her own with the Lantern, sah?"

"She is, Caleb."

"And we is makin' six knots, out o' a four-knot breeze?"

"We certainly are, Caleb."

"She doin' the same, sah?"

"Yes."

"But she look like common coaster."

"She has that appearance."

"Waal, master, I think she don't show her true color."

"Why, Caleb?"

"Yer see, sah, when we was anchor in de Lake, she sail in an' drop anchor too."

"When?"

"Two day ago."

"Well?"

"Waal, master, I watch her close, an' I see a man go ashore, an' I didn't see him no more till you come on board de Lantern."

"And then, Caleb?"

"Den, sah, he comed out to de lugger, an' soon as we up anchor she foller mighty quick, an' dar she be, sah, not half a league away, altho' we hab sail well, fer de Lantern hain't no pokey boat; is she, sah?"

"No, Caleb, she is the fastest craft afloat, of her tonnage, I think.

"But is that all you have noticed about the lugger?"

"Not adzactly, sah, for it do seem ter me that she hab been builded too mighty awkward like."

"How so?"

"Yer see, master, she hab got mighty pretty sticks, sah, an' mighty large sails, and de hull it am awful narrow fer a lugger, an' de bulwarks don't look natural."

"By the Lord Harry, Caleb! but you have a good eye.

"There was something queer about that craft I couldn't find out, and now I see it."

"Yas, master."

"She has false bulwarks and a false poop-deck and bows to her, or I am greatly mistaken."

"She do look so, sah."

"How many men did you see on board of her?"

"When she were at anchor, sah?"

"Yes."

"Three, sah, 'sides de white man I seen go ashore."

"Negroes, were they?"

"One nigger, sah, an' t'other two was white."

"And these were all?"

"All I seen, sah; but dere may be more in dat hull."

"Well, Caleb, I will tell you that I saw a man constantly following me when I was in the city, though he tried to appear as though he was not doing so.

"When I came out to the yacht lay before yesterday, he jumped into a vehicle and drove

out too, and I saw him go on board yonder craft.

"When I returned to town, he soon after was on my track in the city, and determined to settle the matter, I came off in the Lantern, and I recognize him now with my glass on that lugger."

"What yer goin' ter do, sah?"

"I will try and entrap him, if he is after me."

"Whar de trap, master?" asked the practical Caleb.

"Wait and see."

"But now head in for the Lakelands harbor, and as soon as we land mount a horse, if the lugger continues on up the coast, and ride beyond Cliff Point and see if she stands on for Mobile."

"If she puts back, as though to come to Lakelands after dark, ride back with all speed and inform me."

"Yes, master," cried the faithful Caleb, and an hour after he was dashing along through the forest, to get to a point miles above, where he could watch the movements of the strange lugger, which had continued on past the Lakelands harbor, when the Jack-o'-lantern put her helm down and ran in to an anchorage.

CHAPTER XLI.

A SON'S PLEADING.

WHEN the Jack o'-lantern luffed up and dropped anchor in the Lakelands harbor, Mrs. Wyndham sat at the library window reading, and the splash of the mud-book in the water, and rattling of the blocks, as the sails came down with a run, caused her to start to her feet with a glad cry, for it aroused her from her book, to see her son just coming ashore in a boat.

Hastily she left the mansion and advanced to meet him, and the greeting was most affectionate, for her boy was all that she had in the wide world to love, and his mother had ever been Percy's idol, and also his ideal of womanhood.

"Welcome home, my son," said the fond mother, with a quiver in her voice, as he drew her hand in his arm, and led her back toward the house.

"Thank you, mother, and I am glad to get home once more," was the answer.

"But what news bring you, Percy?"

"Much, mother."

"That strange and beautiful girl, what of her?"

"Bessie Gito?"

"Of course, for of whom else could I speak."

"She is at sea, mother."

"At sea?"

"Yes, for she has sailed as the commander of a vessel."

"Percy Wyndham, what do you mean?" asked the surprised lady.

"You know that she was as good a sailor as any man on the coast?"

"So it has been said."

"Well, mother, Bessie has gone on a cruise in an armed vessel, and she is known as Captain Bess."

"Captain Bess?"

"Yes, mother, and I regret to have heard another name applied to her."

"Oh, Percy, what can you mean?"

"I mean, mother, that some misunderstand her bold act, and call her Buccaneer Bess."

"How dare they call her that, Percy?"

"Because, mother, she has stepped outside the pale of womanhood, unsexed herself, as it were, and having gone cruising in an armed vessel, under no flag, it causes her to be looked upon as a pirate, or at least little better, and to which title some of her adventures give coloring."

"But what has she done, my son?"

"I will tell you," and in a few words Percy told the story of Bessie's remarkable career, until her boarding the brig, as told to him by the Governor-Commandant, who had it from the lips of the captain of the Lioness.

Mrs. Wyndham was astounded by the news, but asked:

"But what can be her motive for this reckless act?"

"Revenge, I learn."

"Against whom?"

"Forrester, the Freebooter, it is said, for the rumor goes round that she has been cruelly wronged by him, and that she intends to hunt him to the death."

"Why this is nonsense, Percy"

"Yes, if she had gone on the track of Mark Mortimer I could understand it."

"Where is he?"

"In New Orleans."

"And she was there and did not see him?"

"So it seems, mother."

"But he was reported dangerously ill."

"Ahl his conscience has unnerved him."

"No, mother, he is not ill, but only pretending to be."

"Why, Percy, you astonish me more and more."

"I have been greatly astonished myself, mother, and look for new developments."

"But I will explain his motives, as near as I can guess them."

"Well, Percy?"

"Well, mother, he has entered upon a plot to destroy a noble woman, and by her death to raise himself to wealth."

"But who is this woman, Percy?"

"One who, although bearing a name that you and I hate, is yet as pure as snow, and the angel that she is called by those that know her well."

"Percy Wyndham, of whom are you speaking?" said his mother, severely.

"I am speaking of one, mother, upon whom I will not follow Bible precept, and visit the sins of her father."

"Name her!"

"I am speaking, mother, of one who by her father's death was left a fortune, and which fortune seems to be a curse to her, for the will so reads, that *should she die*, her brother will be her heir."

"I am listening, Percy Wyndham," said Mrs. Wyndham, sternly.

"Having received the amount of his inheritance in cash, to pay his gambling debts, that brother was left a pauper, dependent upon his sister's bounty."

"To get money, he endeavored to sell his sister to one who bid high for her, but who failed to get her."

"At the same time this brother sought to have her kidnapped by hirelings, and borne far away, but I happened near and prevented that crime."

"Failing in this, he laid a deeper plot to have her killed, and once more I saved her life."

"Again foiled, he gave not up his diabolical intention, but laid a deeper plot to have her die."

"That plot was to feign sickness, send after his sister to come to him, he knowing well that she would do so, and then have a hired assassin kill her ere she reached him."

"This is surmise mother, built upon part facts, and ferreted out as well as I could. The assassin, one night of storm hurled her into the sea—"

"Good God!" cried Mrs. Wyndham.

"Did he do this?" she added in a low tone, full of deepest feeling.

"He did, mother: but, thank Heaven he was foiled, for she is a good swimmer, held up bravely, and soon drifted upon a small wreck, upon which she managed to draw herself and was saved."

"Saved?"

"Yes, mother, for with the dawn I sighted the little wreck—"

"You, Percy?"

"Yes, mother."

"A third time saving her?"

"Yes, mother, for, upon running down and boarding the wreck, I found that poor, persecuted girl in the cock-pit, seated up to her knees in water, and clinging to her little ark of refuge nearer dead than alive."

"And this girl was Mabel Mortimer, Percy?"

"Yes, mother."

"I guessed it."

"I meant you should know all."

"Where is she now, Percy?"

"Upon the yacht!"

"The Jack-o'-lantern?"

"Yes."

"And you have brought her here?"

"I have kept her hidden, for it is best for the present, that her brother may believe her dead, and then she can discover his villainy in its worst form."

"She has told me all, mother, and bitterly has she mourned over the deadly past that has raised a vendetta between her name and our name."

"Percy, you remember my oath?" sternly said the mother.

"I do, mother."

"And I remember, too, that though Mabel Mortimer owes much to me, that I owe to her my life, and the lives of those poor slaves who were with me in the launch the day she saved us."

"You say you love me, mother, and that you would rather I should lie at the bottom of the sea, than be saved by her hand."

"But loving me, I do not believe you, and if it had not been for her, you, to-day, would be alone in the world, with no son to love you, and to clear your pathway adown life's hill-side."

"Years are coming to you, mother, and a few more and the silver threads will mingle with your black hair, and you will need me then."

"Remember, she is not guilty of the crimes of her father and her brother."

"Remember that the death-debt was canceled when I saved her life, and again when she saved mine."

"Not one word of love have I breathed to her; only gratitude has she shown to me."

"But I have begged her to come here, to your home, to my home, and seek a haven for the present."

"She wishes the world to believe her dead, for she wishes to know just what her brother is."

"Not that she desires to bring him to justice, but that she may cast him out of her heart forever."

"Be yourself, dear mother, and bury the past with her."

"Take her by the hand, and bid her welcome even across the threshold of a Wyndham, and if she prove unworthy your confidence, cast her off as a serpent that you had warmed to life, to receive its poisonous sting."

"Come, mother, decide, for there is an important work ahead of me to-night, which I will explain, for I need your advice."

"Speak, mother!"

He waited in breathless silence, eagerly watching the workings of her face, which was white and hard.

At last she said in a voice hardly audible:

"Percy, my son, my noble boy, I retract my oath, and I will bid that poor, persecuted girl welcome, even across the threshold of Lakelands."

"Come, I will go with you to bring her here."

"Not now, mother, for her presence here must be a secret, so await the coming of darkness, and God bless you for your noble sacrifice!"

He bent over and kissed her, and burying her face in her hands she burst into tears, the first she had shed, even in all her woe.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE MIDNIGHT ATTACK.

WHEN the first shadows of night settled upon sea and land, Mrs. Wyndham, who, having made up her mind, as to her course, seemed most anxious to meet Mabel Mortimer, set off with her son to the pier.

In obedience to the orders of Percy, but two of the crew had remained on board.

But he sprung into a boat and leaving his mother in the pavilion on the end of the wharf, at once rowed out to the yacht.

Entering the cabin he was met by the tearful face of Mabel Mortimer.

"My mother awaits to welcome you, Miss Mortimer, and I too give you hearty welcome to Lakelands," he said, in a low, kindly tone.

She made no reply, but grasped his hand, and he led her from the cabin.

"Dot, keep a bright lookout, for I will be back soon, I expect," he said to one of the negroes on board, and assisting Mabel into the boat alongside he seized the oars and rowed ashore.

Upon the dock, at the water stairs, stood Mrs. Wyndham, and springing ashore Percy took Mabel's hand and said:

"Mother, permit me to present Miss Mortimer of The Everglades, and to whose courage I owe my life."

Mabel Mortimer trembled like an aspen, and seeing it, Mrs. Wyndham took her hand, drew her toward her, and said softly:

"Welcome to Lakelands, Miss Mortimer, and may your coming dispel the shadow that hangs over our home."

Then Mabel Mortimer raised her face, and her beautiful eyes looked straight into those of

the mistress of Lakelands, while she said fearlessly:

"Mrs. Wyndham, both you and I have much to forget and forgive, but as the first cruel blow was struck by a Mortimer against a Wyndham, a Mortimer, girl though I be, shall be the first to forgive."

"My poor little wounded dove," said Mrs. Wyndham, softly, and she drew the girl to her and kissed her.

And up to the mansion the three slowly walked in silence, the broad steps were ascended, and the threshold of Lakelands was crossed by a Mortimer.

"Massa, Caleb done come, sah?" cried Uncle Toby, as Percy ushered Mabel into the library.

"Where is he?"

"Here, sah," and Caleb came forward.

"Well?"

"Massa, you am more den right," said the negro who had been sent as a spy on the movements of the mysterious lugger.

"What is it, Caleb, that you have discovered?"

"De lugger, sah, rounded dat point; but 'stead o' goin' on like a honest craft ter Mobile, why, sah, she just lay to ontill near sunset, an' then she put about and are coming down the coast under shortened sail."

"I expected it."

"Yes, sah; and more, massa, I seen a dozen men on board o' her, sah."

"Well, Caleb, we may expect a visit from her to-night."

"Yes, sah."

"And I want you to aid me."

"I'll do it, sah."

"Go to the quarter and get your crew and half a dozen more boys you can depend on."

"I kin do it, sah."

"Then come here and I will arm some of you, and the rest will get weapons on board the yacht."

"The Lantern, sah."

"Yes."

"Day is dere, fer sure."

"Well, then, when you are all armed, take two row-boats and go in them to the cedar point, take them out of the water, and wait there."

"Yes, sah; but de Lantern?"

"Lock the companionway of the yacht and leave it to take care of itself; but drop both anchors."

"Yes, master."

"When you are in the thicket wait until the lugger comes into the harbor, and when her crew have come ashore in their boat, you launch your boats, board and take her."

"We kin do it, sah."

"If she anchors outside, board her the same when her boat has left."

"If she don't anchor, sir?"

"You can separate your boats, row around her, and in this breeze easily capture her."

"We kin do it, sah; but how about them fellers as lands?"

"I will look after them."

"He! he! I guess dey will be well tuk keer of den."

"But, master, yer'll want some of the boys ter help yer?"

"Yes, Toby, and the bome brigade will be sufficient."

"Yes, master."

"I guess I go now ter 'tend ter de work," and Caleb departed full of importance, and only fearful that the lugger might not put in an appearance in the harbor.

True to his instructions, he got his men together, a dozen in all, and was half an hour after in the little cedar thicket that grew on the point which formed an arm of Lakelands harbor.

Hardly had he gotten in position when he sighted a sail.

"It am de lugger, gemmens," he said, putting his glass to his eye with the air of an admiral.

"Yer makes her out de lugger, does yer, sah?" asked one of his devoted followers.

"I does."

"She am eatin' slowly in to de land, and is just now off De Everglades, as a blind nigger kin see."

None of the black tars wishing to come under the category of "blind niggers," they all sung out in chorus:

"We sees her!"

This chorus called from the admiral a rebuke for their thoughtlessness, and they sub-

sided into dead silence, which was soon broken by one weak-kneed black tar with:

"I say, Cap'n Caleb, hadn't I better go up ter der house an' tell master de lugger am sighted?"

"No, sah, yer stays right here wid de army."

The unfortunate man groaned in agony of spirit, for he hated firearms above all things.

But all now became interested in watching the lugger, and saw her come slowly along the coast with very little sail set.

Getting opposite to the entrance to Lakelands harbor, they gave a groan in chorus, for they thought she was going by.

But suddenly she put her helm down and ran in for the harbor.

Nearer and nearer she came, and, under only sail enough to make her mind her helm, she ran in through the channel and luffed up.

A light anchor was then lowered noiselessly into the water, and soon after a dark object moved slowly away from her side.

It was a boat with muffled oars; but the night was too dark for Caleb and his crew to see how many men it carried.

They saw it land and then waited for some little time to give the occupants a chance to get away from the shore.

"Come, gemmens, now we has ter act, an' de nigger dat backslides his duty, has got ter be sold off dis heur plantation."

"Does yer hear?"

They all heard, for the one furthest in the rear, and who happened to be the same individual who had desired to carry information to his master, said:

"Yas, I hears, but I guesses I'll run round de shore ter tell massa, fer he mought hab dropped ter sleep."

"Nigger Dick! ef yer jist makes der move ter paddle dem crooked legs o' yourn, yer'll drop ter sleep yerself, an' yer won't wake up nuther, till Jedgement Day am sounded with Gabriel's horn."

This terrible threat of Admiral Caleb had the effect of making Dick an active member of the attacking party, for he sprung nimbly to the front, and seized hold of an oar with alacrity.

The oars had been already muffled, and the two boats stole quietly away from the shore.

As they drew near the lugger, they all were a trifle nervous, expecting a volley of musketry.

But no shots came, the lugger's side was reached, and Caleb sprung on board with a cutlass in his hand large enough for Goliath.

But he found no foe for his steel, greatly to his disappointment, and had to content himself with taking quiet possession in the name of his master.

Finding that his crew were so elated at making a bloodless capture that they were becoming talkative, Caleb silenced them very summarily with:

"When massa done drive dem pirates back from de house, den we has got ter do some tall fightin', gemmens."

Hardly had the words left his lips, when flashes were seen near the house, and rapid reports followed.

Then came the sound of death-cries, hurrying feet, shots, shouts, curses, all commingled.

As the sounds neared the shore, proving that the pirates were in full retreat, Caleb had great difficulty in keeping his crew quiet, and then a loud voice cried:

"Now, lads, fire on them, and then to our boats and back to the lugger!"

This was too much for Dick, who had been threatened with an eternal sleep, and one other, and into the water they went, and dove toward the opposite shore.

But Caleb was not demoralized by this desertion of one-sixth of his force, but prepared to meet the enemy, who were coming off in one boat.

There were but four men in it, and they were pulling for dear life all of them, and struck the lugger with a force that stove their boat.

But they bounded on deck, to find themselves in the clutches of Caleb and his crew, and in an instant the battle had ended, with the death of two and the capture of the others, just as Percy Wyndham followed them in a light boat with several black oarsmen.

"Bravo, Caleb, you have done nobly; but have you lost any of your boys?" cried Percy.

"Yes, sah, two done lost; but I guesses we find 'em when dey stops runnin', for dey got

skeert and skooted," answered Caleb, humiliated to make the report.

"I am glad it is no worse here, for on shore one poor lad was killed, and two others wounded."

"But we have made a brave fight, and have killed and captured all, and their vessel too."

"Are you Mr. Percy Wyndham?" asked one of the prisoners, sullenly.

"I am."

"Which would you rather do, hang me, or hear what I can tell you?" was the significant question.

"What have you to tell?"

"Much that you would like to know."

"Then you shall go free when you have made your confession; but for the present I shall put you in irons," was the response.

CHAPTER XLII.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

FOR some time, after the news of his sister's death reached him, Mark Mortimer kept his rooms, and still refused himself to all visitors under the plea of illness.

Duke, the mulatto, had become his faithful nurse, while he had sent his yacht back to The Everglades with Fidele and the other negroes, it being his intention to spend some time in the city, and seem in no haste to return to his home and seize upon the fortune that he supposed was his own.

As he sat in his rooms one afternoon, fretting upon having to remain indoors, and shut off from outside pleasures, Duke came in and announced:

"The Senor Pietro to see you, sir."

"Ah! show him in," and he brightened up.

A moment after Pietro entered, and was motioned to a seat by the young aristocrat, for in spite of himself, Mark Mortimer could not but treat the man with respect.

Notwithstanding the man's crime-stained life, there was that about him which commanded respect.

"Well, senor, what news?" he asked eagerly.

"Will you let your man bring me some of that good cognac, to oil my tongue, which does not work just smooth?" was the cool and exasperating reply.

"Yes; here, Duke, bring liquor and glasses," impatiently ordered Mortimer.

Duke obeyed, and then the young planter asked:

"Well, now what news?"

"I hope your health is improved?"

"D— my health, man! and tell me what news you bring."

Then Senor Pietro coolly poured out a glass of brandy, and said in a tone that was significant:

"You had better take a glass too, sir, if your doctor does not forbid."

Mark Mortimer was struck by the man's manner, and turned slightly pale.

But he took the advice and the brandy too.

"Your good health, sir," said the exasperating Italian, and as his guest made no response, other than an impatiently muttered imprecation, he continued:

"I have come for my pay, Mr. Mortimer."

"For both deeds?" eagerly asked the young man.

"No, for the murder of your sister you owe me four thousand dollars more."

"I admit that; but why have you not accomplished your other task, which was the easier?"

"I endeavored so to do, but failed."

"Bah! such a man as you fail."

"Couldn't help it, sir, for I did my part well."

"I chartered a yacht, disguised her as a lugger, took a dozen good men on board, and followed the Jack-o'-lantern to her harbor at Lakelands."

"At night I ran in and made an attack on the house; but, at ill-fortune would have it, that dashing young fellow Wyndham had seen us land, mustered his negroes, killed and captured all but myself, and got the yacht, too."

"Curses! some strange Providence protects that man," said Mortimer, savagely.

"So I think, senor; but do you wish me to make another attempt?"

"By all means."

"Well, I will do so, senor, if you will bide my time and pay me my dues."

"I will do that, and promise you five thousand if you kill Percy Wyndham."

"I'll get your money, senor; but now settle my little bill, please."

"Here are the four thousand," and Mark threw him a roll of bills.

"These settle for your sister's murder, sir—"

"Hang it, man, don't dwell so coolly on that affair."

"It was a very cool plot, senior, and an equally cool murder," was the imperturbable response.

"Well, what more do you want?"

"Settlement for the yacht and the crew who were killed, for I must pay it to their poor, destitute families."

"Then there are other trifling expenses, such as stores, fitting out the craft, and such."

"Curse you, Pietro, do you expect me to pay for your failure?"

"I most certainly do, senior."

"I will not do it."

"Oh, yes, senior, if you hire an assassin you must pay him for his work."

There was a deep meaning in those words, and Mark Mortimer understood it and said:

"Well, I'll not quarrel with you."

"How much do I owe you?"

"Two thousand more, senior."

It was paid him, and Senior Pietro took his leave and returned to his own house.

There he found none other than Conrad, the Creole.

"Well, senior?" he asked.

"I saw the party and he refuses to pay for work not done."

"Curses on him, or her, or whoever it is!"

"I risked my life, stole that yacht, and am the only one of the crew who escaped, besides being to some expense, and now, because I was not successful in killing Mr. Wyndham, I get no money," said Conrad, the Creole, in an injured tone.

"I am sorry for you, Conrad, and will myself pay you a few hundred, as I engaged you for the party."

"I regret you did not do your work, but I will give you a chance to try it again."

"I shall have to receive a good sum, for that young planter is a dangerous man to deal with."

"You shall be well paid, and here are five hundred dollars for you now."

Conrad, the Creole, took the money in an indifferent way, and when he was once outside the door he muttered:

"Well, Conrad, the Creole, you have not done so bad, for you told your story to Mr. Wyndham, got paid well for it, besides being given your life, and now worm out of Pietro a cool five hundred more."

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE LIONESS OF THE SEA.

WHEN the Skeleton Schooner set sail from New Orleans, it was the self-avowed determination of Captain Bess to accomplish three things:

First, having discovered that she must bide her time to reap her revenge upon Mark Mortimer, she intended to hunt down Forrester the Freebooter, to at once end his career of cruelty and crime, and thereby save many lives and much suffering, while, at the same time she could be avenged upon her for his intended treachery toward her father and herself.

Second, while searching for the Red Rover, she would strike a blow against all pirates, and thereby prove to the Governor-Commandant, who had so kindly trusted her with a commission, that he was not unworthy of his confidence.

Then she would be free to act against Mark Mortimer, and that bit of revenge was to be kept as a last delicious morsel, after which she would be content to retire from the world and live in solitude.

The Skeleton Schooner she found had been, if anything, improved by her capture, for while her armament was the same, she had undergone a complete overhauling, which had not been possible while she was flying the black flag.

Once out of the Mississippi, and Captain Bess had Raoul Langdon organize her crew thoroughly, for there was certain minutiae about the management and discipline of a well-conducted vessel of war she did not fully understand.

This service the young lieutenant gladly did, and before the fleet craft had dropped the land from sight, the Skeleton Schooner was a model of discipline and order.

This being accomplished, Captain Bess

called the crew to quarters, and in her clear, musical tones, cried:

"Men, this vessel has been hunted the wide seas over as the Skeleton Schooner, a buccaneer craft under the command of Forrester the Freebooter, who has also won the name of the Skimmer of the Seas."

"Now, she enters upon a different service, and is no longer the Skeleton Schooner, but the *Lioness of the Sea*!"

Three cheers broke from the crew at the new name of their vessel, and then Captain Bess continued:

"Having now given you the name of our vessel, it is but just that I unfold the flag which is to float above our decks."

Stepping to the peak halyards she fastened to them what appeared to be a ball of black silk.

But, when it was shaken out to catch the breeze, in the sable field was visible the emblem which she had told the Governor-Commandant was to be her flag.

With the raising of the flag, Raoul Langdon gave a signal, and at once there pealed forth the boom of a heavy gun, and this was followed by others until each cannon on the schooner had given a salute from its brazen mouth.

This service, of christening her craft and saluting her flag being over, Captain Bess called her officers together for a consultation, and both Binnacle Ben and Boatswain Brail were included in the invitation to assemble in the cabin.

For a long time that conference lasted, and then the *Lioness of the Sea* was put away for an island among the Bahamas.

CHAPTER XLV.

AN APPARITION.

THE point of destination with "The *Lioness*," as the crew of Captain Bess not only called the schooner, but herself, was the island where was the secret haunt of Forrester the Freebooter.

Knowing as he did the retreat, and the leading to it, Raoul Langdon had urged that the schooner go there at once, and perhaps the Red Rover might be found there.

If not, he had said, it would be but a matter of a few weeks, to await the coming of the pirate, when Forrester, his craft and crew could all be captured.

It was night when the schooner arrived in sight of the group of islands; but it was determined to run in, and with Raoul Langdon in the bows, and Henry Harding at the wheel, she began to run the dangerous channel.

The men were all at their guns, stripped for action, should they come upon the Red Rover, and under shortened sail she glided slowly along.

Without a miss the *Lioness* was carried into the basin, drifting against the wreck as quietly as though being warped alongside of a pier in port.

But no one seemed visible, and, after the vessel was made fast, Captain Bess went ashore, leaving Raoul Langdon leaning over the bulwarks, gazing down into the deep waters in whose depths he knew that his sister had sunk to rise no more.

Up the rope ladder went Captain Bess without the slightest fear, and gaining the cliff, she stood an instant gazing out over the waters, and then down upon the schooner in the basin.

No one had followed her and she was alone.

But, undaunted, she walked toward the thicket, from whence came the glimmer of a light.

Some one was on the island, that was certain; but then Lieutenant Langdon had told her that Captain Forrester always left one or two men there.

She had no fear of one man, and little dreaded two, so continued on her way, following the well-worn path to the thicket.

Nearer and nearer she drew, going directly toward the light, and soon paused within thirty paces of the cabin, from the open door of which shone the lamp, which was upon a table.

One glance into that cabin, and in spite of the girl's wonderful nerve she started, and gave a slight exclamation, either of amazement or alarm.

For long, long minutes she stood there like one spell-bound, gazing with a kind of awed fascination she could not resist, upon something that met her eyes in the cabin.

That something seemed not human, yet was

so, for it was in man's awful shape when the damp and worms of the grave have eaten the flesh from his bones, leaving but the ghastly skeleton.

Seated at the table, his head bent forward and resting in the bony hands, was a skeleton form.

At first glance Captain Bess had thought that some poor unfortunate had died thus, and time had crumbled the flesh to dust.

But then she knew that only a few weeks had passed since Raoul Langdon and Harry Harding had left the island, and skeletons were not made in so short a time.

But its presence there she could not account for, and she was about to go cautiously forward to get a closer view, when, to her horror, the ghastly form moved.

Instantly she stopped, and peered with fixed eyes to see if she had been mistaken; if it was not her excited brain that had conjured up the idea of its moving.

But no, again it moved, the head was raised from the hands, the form stood upright, and, as though feeling her presence, came toward the door.

There it halted, and remained standing, gazing out into the darkness.

As though its bony eye-sockets had sight, it seemed to see her, for it came slowly toward her.

Quickly she stepped backward, and so receding as the skeleton form advanced, she made her way along the pathway she had come.

At last she reached the ladder of rope, and without walking down, with her eyes still staring at the skeleton, she began to descend.

Step by step she went, keeping the same distance from the ghastly form, which also swung its bony legs over the cliff and began to descend.

At last she reached the dock and turned to spring on board her schooner, when lo! the vessel was gone!

CHAPTER XLVI.

AT CLOSE QUARTERS WITH DEATH.

AT the discovery she made, that the schooner was gone, Captain Bess was almost overcome.

She had been slowly retreating before a skeleton form, and, when she believed herself safe, and with her crew at her call, it was horrible to find that she was alone.

Was it an island of witchery? Did death hold full sway there? Were the superstitious stories, which she had always derided, really true that sailors told of sea spooks and other strange creatures?

Must she yield before this skeleton form, or fight it?

Such were the thoughts that flashed through poor Bessie's heated brain.

What to do, she knew not, until she saw that the ghastly form had reached the deck, and was advancing toward her.

With a sudden impulse she determined still to retreat as far as lay in her power.

She saw that the companionway of the wreck was open, and it seemed as though there was a sickly light shining forth.

Instantly she grasped her sword more firmly and bounded toward it.

There was a light below in the cabin, but a strangely dim one; but she had no time to hesitate, for her death-like pursuer was almost upon her.

Down the companionway she sprang, and found herself in the large, and really comfortable looking cabin, for it was furnished.

But, horror of horrors!

Before her, at the forward part of the cabin, where heavy curtains fell across to conceal what was beyond, she beheld another skeleton form.

A sickly light from a swinging lamp gave just glow enough for her to see that her passage was barred, and that the skeleton's bony right hand clasped a sword.

Was it, could it be her relentless pursuer from the cabin in the thicket above?

With a shudder, she glanced over her shoulder, and that question was answered.

It was not the same.

No, for that one stood in the companionway, and it, too, was armed with a cutlass.

Then the pluck of the girl arose, and her nerve came to her aid.

Armed as they were, they, doubtless, meant to make her, like themselves, a skeleton.

That roused her antagonism, and springing

to one side of the cabin, she put herself upon the defensive.

Instantly, in deadly silence, the two skeleton forms advanced upon her, their blades on guard.

A few steps they took, and, as she moved not, nor showed any sign of weakening, as if by common consent, they paused.

This was a slight encouragement for the brave girl, and she cried in ringing tones:

"Come on, you bony relics of the grave, for Captain Bess does not fear to cross your blades!"

The skeleton forms still did not advance, though thus invited, and each turned his gaze toward the other, and then from one, in deep tones, which to the ears of poor Bessie seemed strangely sepulchral, came this question:

"Who are you?"

"Captain Bess, the Pirate Huntress," was the prompt response, in a fearless tone.

"When did you come here?"

"An hour ago."

"For what purpose did you come?"

"To make skeletons of pirates."

"How did you come?"

"In my schooner."

"Where is your schooner?"

"It will soon be back, with coffins for you two bony gentlemen."

"Was your schooner in this basin?"

"Yes."

The skeleton who had asked the question now looked at his bony comrade in evident surprise.

He was the one who had followed Bessie from the cliff.

"What does he mean, shipmate?" he asked.

"He tells the truth, Jack, a schooner did come in here, and scared me nearly out of my wits; but her officer in charge must have been in before, for when he heard the waves moaning in the cavern he seemed to understand that an island tidal wave was coming, for he slipped his bawlers and drifted out mighty quick," was the answer of the other skeleton.

"Well, you two bony ghosts, if you don't mean to attack me, step nearer this lamp and give me a better look at you," said Bessie.

"Well, boy, you certainly have got nerve."

"I am no boy."

"What are you then?"

"I told you my name was Captain Bess."

"A woman, by Neptune's beard!"

"Yes."

"And you command the schooner that was in this basin?"

"I do."

"What shall we do with her, Jack?"

"If you and Jack have any regard for your lives, you better not do anything with me, for my schooner will soon be back."

"Not under ten hours, for the tidal wave won't be over before then."

"Well, when she does come, you'll suffer if you harm me, even if you can do so, which I doubt."

"Well, you are a nerry girl and no mistake; but what if we prove your friends?"

"Then we can come to terms."

"We are your friends then."

"Now let me ask a few questions?"

"Let run your tongue tackle then."

"Who are you?"

"The guards of this island."

"Who left you here?"

"The captain."

"Who is your captain?"

"We are safe if we answer all!"

"Yes."

"The Skimmer of the Sea he is called."

"Forrester, the Freebooter?"

"Yes."

"Where is he now?"

"Gone on a cruise."

"When did he leave?"

"Two days ago."

"When will he return?"

"He said within the month."

"Let me get a better look at you."

They both advanced under the light, and she gazed attentively at them, and, in spite of herself, laughed, which caused one of them to say:

"You didn't think it so funny awhile ago."

"No, but I do now; but, in the name of the Calendar of Saints, what did you rig yourselves up like this for?"

"The chief's orders."

Again she laughed and eyed them curiously. They were dressed in the deepest black, which fitted their forms closely.

Then, in the purest white, upon them, front and back, was painted a perfect skeleton form, while over their faces they wore a mask to represent the human skull.

"Well, of all masquerades, this is the greatest."

"But what is the use of this?"

"Our chief has a new kink in his wicked head."

"What is it?"

"Oh, he ran in here and painted the schooner's hull, sails and spars jet-black, and set the tailors of the craft to rigging us up in this style, and made us swear to wear them day and night."

"Then with his skeleton crew he set sail to frighten every ship off of the ocean."

"Except one."

"Which is that one?"

"The Lioness of the Sea."

"Whew! Well, we'll ship with you, captain, and I guess we can give you a few points where to find the chief cruising."

"Do so, and your lives are safe, and if you confess where his treasure is buried here on this island, you can share it equally with my crew."

"That's fair, captain; and if you wish to keep the chief out of mischief, you better sail after him now, for he has run down the American Gulf coast, intending to revenge himself, for some reason, upon a fisherman and his pretty daughter, and then marry a young lady who is known as the heiress of The Everglades."

Bessie turned deadly pale at these words, and at once confessed to the two pirates in their skeleton uniform just who she was.

They had taken a fancy to her already, led her to where the pirate treasures were buried, and the three setting to work to unearth them, had a goodly pile of riches on the deck of the old hull when the schooner came running into the basin at sunrise, Raoul Langdon and all on board greatly alarmed for her safety, as they had not seen her leave the vessel, and believed her to be in the cabin, and the young officer would not disturb her, when his knowledge of the little harbor and its dangers told him, from unmistakable signs, that the water, from some movement of the sea, was about to recede from the basin.

With wild cheers the crew greeted their girl captain, and the pirate treasure being quickly thrown on board, the Lioness set sail in pursuit of Forrester, the Freebooter, every stitch of canvas being set, so anxious was Captain Bess to save Mabel Mortimer from the power of the merciless Skimmer of the Seas.

CHAPTER XLVII.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR AT THE EVERGLADES.

It was with a face pale—from having remained long in-doors—and an expression that was very sad, that Mark Mortimer at last appeared on the streets of the city.

Everywhere he met sympathizers in the loss of his sister, and by such a fearful accident, for it had become whispered around "that her loss was his gain," speaking in a sense of inheritance.

The belles of society, who hoped to catch a man with just such an estate as The Everglades, said:

"Poor fellow! how deeply he grieves for his sister."

"He would make a good husband."

So many designing mothers, with daughters "on the carpet," had a way of thinking too, and it was not very long before the fashionable world in the city, were, metaphorically speaking, at the feet of the young aristocrat.

Every day cards and invitations flooded his table, and of course they were sent from kindness, for a man in deep mourning could not be expected to attend parties, though he did manage to drop in on a few friends for a morning call.

He also managed to "drop in" on the gamblers too, for an evening call, after a few weeks had passed.

The truth was he needed money, for Senor Pietro had bled him well, and he felt that in gaming he alone could replenish his purse, until such a time as he desired to take charge of the estate of The Everglades, and which, strange to say, he felt in no hurry about.

But luck seemed to have forsaken him from the day he said it was to be his slave, and that day was when he heard the news of his sister's death.

Away went his cash, and he began to borrow, for he had many friends to lend, as it was supposed he was only temporarily embarrassed.

But borrowed money goes as easily over a game of cards as does one's own gold, and debts of honor accumulated against the supposed young millionaire until he felt it his duty to go home and face the ghosts his conscience told him he would see in every closet and corner of the grand old home.

"Curse the place!" he said fiercely. "I will go there, send for my lawyers, have the inheritance arranged legally, and then leave it under an able manager, while I marry some rich heiress here and settle down to a life in the city."

"I will buy me an elegant house here, or marry one, and let the old estate go ruin, for I believe I would get to be a veritable coward if I went there to live."

"Come, Duke, pack up, for we go to The Everglades to-morrow."

"How will you go, master?"

"I will borrow Fred Fenter's yacht, and ship a crew of my own."

And thus it was that the Quickstep, a pretty craft belonging to a young man about town, set sail the following day with the so-called master of The Everglades.

The run over was a pleasant one, and with rare good common sense the slaves gave Mark Mortimer a royal welcome, for they looked upon him as master, and yet they had never liked him.

The house was thrown open, and the library had been aired and recarpeted, so that the red stain made by Juan Gito's life-current was not to be seen.

Still the room told of the tragic scene and cruel murder, and the master of The Everglades wandered into the dining-room.

But there he saw his sister's chair, and he almost fled from the room.

Her room door, too, stared him in the face as he went up-stairs, and hardly had he thrown himself into a chair to write to his lawyers, to say that he was at home to have the matter of his inheritance settled, when a gentle rap came upon the door.

It was Fidele, and she was weeping, for the fate of her mistress was ever present with her, and the coming back of her master reopened the wound.

"Get out, curse you, with your tears!"

He yelled the words, and his face was livid, and away fled poor Fidele in terror.

Having completed his letters, he hastily left his room and the mansion and strolled to the summer-house on the beach.

Hardly had he thrown himself upon a rustic seat, when his eyes fell upon a sun-shade that had belonged to his sister, and had accidentally dropped off of her head and been forgotten.

"God in Heaven! the house, the arbor, the place is haunted," he cried, and he sprung from his seat, to suddenly discover a small boat approaching.

It was a man-of-war's boat, apparently, and an officer in uniform sat in the stern-sheets, while four oarsmen in sailor rig pulled with strong, steady stroke toward the shore.

Up and down the coast Mark Mortimer cast his eyes in search of the vessel from whence the boat had come.

But he saw none, and came to the conclusion that it must be anchored beyond Cliff Point, where was the cabin of Juan Gito.

"Who can he be?"

"I never saw him before, that I remember," he muttered, as he strolled down to the shore to meet the boat.

It reached the landing first, and a tall, elegantly-formed man, with smooth face, short, curling blonde hair, and dark, fiery eyes, sprung out and advanced to meet him.

He was in the uniform of a captain in the American Navy, and greeted Mark Mortimer with courtly grace as he drew near.

"Mr Mortimer, I presume?"

"Yes, sir; whom have I the honor of meeting and welcoming to The Everglades?" and Mortimer tried in vain to recall where he had somewhere seen that handsome face before.

"You may address me as Captain Frankfort of the American navy, my dear Mark, when we are before any of your slaves; but

look into my face and see if you do not recall who I really am?"

"Then we have met before!" and Mark gazed fixedly into the smiling countenance of the man before him.

"Well, my disguise is certainly most thorough, if Mark Mortimer does not recognize his old friend and intended brother-in-law Frank Forrester."

"Good God! you here?" groaned the young planter.

"Why not, the seas and shores are free for me to come and go at my will," was the smiling reply.

"Your hair—" and Mark spoke as though thinking aloud.

"Is a wig, my boy."

"Your beard is gone, and—"

"Ah, a razor easily took that off."

"Your voice is changed, and—"

"I can change my voice at will, while my bearing is more soldier-like, now, than sailor-like, free and easy as it was."

"But why have you come here, Sir Pirate?" suddenly cried Mark indignantly.

"Now I like that, Mortimer, for you to call me a pirate."

"You were formerly such."

"Granted, and I have come to this coast for three reasons."

"First, to revenge myself upon Percy Wyndham—"

"Ah! that is good."

"Certainly, for it chimes in with your humor."

"He is my foe."

"And mine, for he captured my vessels and their crews, got much of my treasure—"

"He gave that to the men who aided him."

"Doubtless, for he is rich, and generous, and the honor was enough for him."

"But I have come to settle the debt I owe him."

"What will cancel it?"

"His death only."

"I am glad to hear you say that."

"Of course, for it will keep him from killing you some day, but let me continue:

"I have another debt of revenge to pay."

"To whom?"

"Bessie Gito."

"Why?"

"She acted as pilot for Percy Wyndham, and proved to be a traitress."

"She is not at home now."

"So I discovered, for I ran my vessel into the lagoon above her home, and paid the cabin a visit."

"She left just after her father's death."

"Juan Gito dead?"

"Yes."

"When did he die?"

"Nearly two months ago."

"How?"

"He was killed."

"By whom?"

"I killed him," was the cool reply.

"You?"

"Yes, he came into my library, and, as we could not agree upon certain matters, he attacked me, and I shot him."

"I believe you shot him before he attacked you."

"Sir!"

"Keep cool, my dear Mark, for it will do you no good to show temper with me."

"Now tell me where is Bessie?"

"They say she ran off with a smuggler craft, and has turned pirate."

"No!" and Frank Forrester seemed surprised beyond measure.

"It is true."

"Then I shall have to find her upon the high seas, and avenge myself upon her."

"Yes."

"Well, I have another motive in coming here."

"What is it?"

"To marry your sister, according to our engagement."

Mark Mortimer started, and turning very pale, said in a quivering voice:

"Frank Forrester, at least respect the dead."

"The dead?" and it was the pirate's turn to grow pale now.

"Yes, my sister Mabel is dead."

"Good God!"

"It is true."

"Your sister Mabel dead?" repeated the pirate slowly, and then fiercely turning upon

the young planter he hissed forth through his shut teeth:

"Then, Mark Mortimer, you are her murderer!"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

BROUGHT TO TERMS.

WHEN Frank Forrester made this telling charge, hurling the words into the teeth of the man before him, Mark Mortimer staggered back as though he had struck him a physical blow.

They were at the little arbor now, for they had walked along as they talked, and with a groan Mark Mortimer sunk into the rustic seat, from which he had risen upon beholding the approaching boat.

"Pirate! red-handed robber of women and children; how dare you make such an accusation against me?" cried Mark Mortimer unable to rise to his feet, and trembling in limb and body, as though he had been seized with a sudden chill.

"Tell me of your sister's death, Mark Mortimer!" was the commanding reply.

"I was ill in New Orleans, and sent my yacht for her to come to me."

"She started, and was lost overboard in a gale," gasped, rather than said the planter.

"Who accompanied her?"

"The crew of my yacht."

"Who else?"

"Her maid."

"And who else?"

"My valet, Duke."

"Ah! and who else was on the boat?" Mark Mortimer remained silent, and the Freebooter continued:

"Answer me; for I shall ferret out and know all."

"There was no one else, excepting a man whom the yacht had picked up at sea, he having been wrecked."

"Did you know that man?"

"I had seen him."

"Mark Mortimer, again I repeat it, that you murdered your sister— Hold! No silly nonsense toward me," and the pirate dropped his hand upon a pistol, for the young planter seemed as though about to spring upon him.

"I will call my slaves, have you seized, and carry you to New Orleans and get the prize offered for your head."

"You will do no such thing, for, did you succeed in getting me there, I would have you hung with me."

"I am guiltless of any crime."

"You speak falsely, and you know it."

"Listen, and see if I do not know you."

"You say that Juan Gito is dead."

"So be it; but before he died I heard from his lips a secret."

The young planter groaned, but spoke no word.

"He told me how you came to his cabin in disguise, and hired him to kidnap your sister."

"The plot was well planned, but failed in the carrying out, through the coming of your foe, Percy Wyndham, upon the scene."

"Again you hired him to make an effort to kidnap and then to kill her."

"A witch maddened young fisherman did carry her off, urged by Juan Gito, through his superstitious fears, and he nearly succeeded in killing her, when the coming of my vessel, the Skeleton Schooner, frightened him to such an extent that he sprang overboard, and again she escaped, and once more Percy Wyndham saved her life."

"Now I know that Juan Gito was cruelly shot by you, when you discovered that he had penetrated your disguise, and knew you as the would be assassin of your sister."

"Now she is dead, and you say that she was lost at sea, and I denounce you as her murderer, for I know the terms of your father's will, and that you have not a dollar of your own."

"I am an evil man, Mark Mortimer, I have led one long life of sin; but your sweet sister won my crime-stained heart, and I will have revenge on you for her death."

"What mean you?" cried the now unnerved man.

"I will tell you."

"I saved your worthless life once—"

"Never!"

"I say I did."

"Name the day."

"It was not by day."

"Name the time, Sir Pirate."

"I will do so."

"I defy you."

"Have you forgotten your duel with Captain Wyndham?"

"No."

"It was then that I saved your life."

"In what way?"

"I will tell you."

"You acted as my second, and as his also."

"I acted as your friend and as his foe, for I knew of his deadly aim, and that he had a nerve of iron, and would kill you."

"Bah!"

"No, I acted dishonorably toward him, when he trusted in my honor, and in his pistol put no bullet!"

"Good God!"

"Oh, well you may exclaim."

"Did you do this accursed wrong?"

"I did, and thereby I saved your life."

Mark Mortimer seemed utterly unnerved by what he had heard, and Forrester, the Freebooter, continued:

"Now, sir, I shall have my revenge upon you, and you may have your vengeance upon Percy Wyndham, for it is my intention to rob his house, and you can kill him."

"What! do you mean for me to go with you?"

"I do."

"Never!"

"Look here, Mark Mortimer, there is no need of mincing matters, so listen to me."

"You murdered your sister, and not one dollar of her fortune shall you have."

"I am a pirate; I have as fleet a craft as ever floated, and as good a crew."

"The seas are full of richly-laden ships, and you can amass a large fortune in a short time."

"I offer you the berth of my first lieutenant, and—"

"How dare you insult me thus?" shrieked Mortimer, springing to his feet, livid with rage.

"Very well; you either accept my terms, or I go to New Orleans, report that you bribed me, the pirate, to load your pistol and not Captain Wyndham's, and—"

"Hold!"

"Hear me, sir!"

"I will find the man that was picked up by your yacht, bribe him to say you hired him to murder your sister, and let the authorities know that you killed Juan Gito to bury with him the secret of your former attacks upon your sister."

"Come, you are a ruined and desperate man."

"You will run through with this estate within a year, if I kept silent and let you have it, so go with me as my officer, or take the chances as the murderer of your sister, the assassin of Gito, the murderer of Captain Wyndham, and—"

"For God's sake, silence, for I yield!"

"I go with you to become, like yourself, a red-handed pirate!" cried the wretched man.

Forrester, the Freebooter, gave a light laugh of triumph, and said:

"I have avenged your sister's death at your hands, Mark Mortimer, by making you a pirate when I could make you a rich man, the master of The Everglades, and let the world believe you honorable."

"So be it; I am content, and now we will be friend."

"Friends!"

He sneered forth the word with his white face buried in his hands.

"Yes, and you are my host, so let us go up to the mansion and have one of your sumptuous dinners, and then we will go to the schooner, your vessel and mine, and together win names that will go down to posterity written in letters of crimson."

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE SKELETON CREW.

PLANTERS and fishermen living along the coast within half a day's sail of Cliff Cottage, were attracted to the peculiar movements of a schooner of large size, and whose decks held a heavy armament and were crowded with men.

At any time the beauty of the vessel would attract attention, for she was a perfect model, from her sharp bow, narrow waist, and rounded stern, to the trunk of her slender, raking masts.

Then, too, honest vessels would have given her a wide berth on account solely of her very rakish and saucy look.

Her sails were new and set without a wrinkle, and she certainly could spread a vast amount of canvas.

Her hull and spars were painted black, the former being relieved by a belt of white passing around her.

Her crew were dressed in black pants, blue shirts and white skull-caps, while the group of officers upon the quarter-deck were attired in a Mexican garb that was very handsome.

As she moved slowly along, close inshore, a flag was visible fluttering from the peak, and there were no other colors visible.

It was a black field with a red band grasping what appeared to be a hangman's noose, or rope.

That was all, but it was a suggestive flag certainly.

The movements of the craft, which had appeared strange to those who saw her, that she had little sail spread, was coming close inshore, and when she came to an inlet, would run into it, if there was depth enough for her, and if not, would send a boat in.

Then, when a lagoon, or bayou, was come to, the schooner would be sure to anchor off of it, and send a boat to examine it.

That she was evidently searching for something, none who saw her could doubt.

But what could it be, there on that coast, to cause a vessel of her piratical look to be so diligently examining every curve and lagoon on the coast was what puzzled those who asked the question.

At last the schooner ran into the mouth of a lagoon, and disappeared from the view.

Luffing up sharply, she dropped anchor, and a moment after a boat pulled away from her side, and went on up the sluggish stream, with tree-lined banks, half hidden by the mossy drapery that hung gracefully from the branches and in many places trailed in the dark waters.

In the boat were four oarsmen, a coxswain at the tiller, and standing in the bow a slender form with a face which, once seen, could never be forgotten, for it was that of Bessie Gito, in her character of Captain Bess.

It was evident that she had taken her position in the bows, to act as pilot through the mazes of the lagoon, and its tributaries, for ever and anon she would give some order to the coxswain, who would head as directed.

Turning from the main stream into a smaller one, the skillful pilot carried her boat through scores of devious water-ways, some of them so narrow that the oars had to be shipped, and the craft pulled along by the branches of the trees, or grasses upon either side.

At last a broad expanse of water appeared before them, which showed that a large lagoon was not far away.

The men resumed their oars, as the stream in which they were widened, and presently the boat glided beneath a huge tree that grew upon one bank, just at the point where the smaller bayou flowed into the larger.

The tree had a list toward the stream, and its branches, with their huge drapery of moss, covered the entire mouth of the little bayou, and formed a natural arbor over the water.

Just as the boat was about to glide out into the large lagoon, Captain Bess suddenly seized the branches overhead with one hand, and pointing with her sword, held in the other, cried to her men, in low, stern tones:

"Upon your lives, silence!"

"Behold the skeleton crew!"

At that instant, straight past the mouth of the small lagoon, going swiftly and silently down the larger stream, was a large boat.

It was not two lengths away from the point of the blade of Captain Bess, moved in perfect silence, for its twelve oars rose and fell seemingly without sound.

In the stern sheets, his hand upon the tiller, sat one who was evidently the commander of the boat, and his gaze seemed bent over the heads of his crew.

But it was not that a boat with thirteen men in it was gliding by with muffled oars that so startled Captain Bess and her men, who turned at her words to gaze where she pointed; but it was the sight which their eyes fell upon, that seemed to freeze the very blood in their hearts with horror.

The boat was long, painted black, and urged by twelve oars, also of sable hue.

But the oarsmen:

They appeared to be living skeletons.

The one at the tiller, the men at the oars, all looked like Death itself.

They pulled with strong, steady stroke, the oars moving noiselessly in the oarlocks, and the dark waters of the lagoon seemed to give back no splash, as the blades fell into it.

The oarsmen, upon a closer look, seemed, however, not to be simply skeleton forms, for they were apparently flesh and sinew, with the white bone outlined upon them, and with a ghastly head that seemed in reality a grinning, hideous skull.

On swept the boat, and then Captain Bess ordered:

"Muffle your oars, men, for I will follow that boat."

The order was quickly obeyed, and into the lagoon swept the cutter, and at once went in pursuit of the skeleton crew.

At last, in the gathering twilight a glimmer was seen ahead.

"It is a battle-lantern."

"See, it flashes through an open port."

"We have found the Red Rover, lads, so back to the Lioness with all speed," cried Captain Bess.

Instantly the command was obeyed, and following the network of bayous unerringly, Captain Bess piloted her little boat back to the schooner, which at once spread her sails and stood along the coast in the darkness, her men at the guns, and the silence of death on board.

CHAPTER I.

THE DEATH GRAPPLE.

As the Lioness glided along close inshore, suddenly a sharp prow was seen to shoot out from the darkness, which, taking shape, soon became wholly visible as a schooner of majestic proportions.

"It is the Rover!"

"Fire!"

Captain Bess fairly shrieked the words, and luffing up sharply, the broadside of the Lioness was poured upon the unsuspecting foe.

The cruel shots cut through rigging and hull and for an instant all was dire confusion on board.

But loud rung the order of the pirate chief, and immediately sail was spread, the helm was put away, and the schooner sped off like the wind, while the buccaneers, rushing to their guns at once began a hot fire upon the daring adversary that had so surprised them.

Then began a hot and savage chase, the pirate schooner leading by nearly a mile, and firing rapidly from her stern guns, and the Lioness pursuing remorselessly, and pouring in a rapid fire from her bow chains.

The two vessels were well matched in speed, the Lioness being a little the fastest perhaps, but her advance was slightly checked by her guns, which caused them to sail about equal.

In guns and crew the pirate was the superior, with the advantage of having men who had been trained in many a red deck.

And thus along the shore they sped, giving and receiving wounds, and dealing death upon each other's crew.

At last the pirate luffed up to round Cliff Point, upon which stood the cabin of Juan Gito, and, as she did so, he sent a broadside upon his foe that caused terrible destruction upon the beautiful Lioness.

Her fore-topmast and bowsprit were shot away, and checked by the wreck, she hove to, while many of her crew were slain, or wounded.

This was the advantage the pirate sought, and instantly he put back for his foe, intending to board.

What guns that could be brought to bear upon the pirate were at once opened upon him, and Captain Bess, roused to fury, cried for boarders to repel boarders.

Upon the deck lay Henry Harding and Boatswain Brail, both dead; but she had to aid her Raoul Langdon and Binnacle Ben, and with the remainder of her crew, she sprung to meet the attack.

With great skill the pirate schooner was laid alongside of the Lioness, and over the bulwarks swarmed Forrester the Freebooter and a score of his men.

But they looked like living skeletons, in their black, tight-fitting clothes, marked with white, in imitation of bones, from feet to skull.

But those bony-looking hands were armed

with cutlass and pistols, and the same having manned the guns showed what damage they could do.

With one bound, after reaching the deck, Forrester, the Freebooter, cleared his way to where Captain Bess stood.

She met his advance, and their blades crossed, while she cried:

"Now, Sir Skimmer of the Sea, answer to Bessie Gito for the past!"

"Great God!"

With the cry the chief started back, his cutlass dropped from his hand, and Captain Bess, with a light laugh cried:

"Thus, Frank Forrester, I end your life!"

She fired full in his face, and he dropped to the deck.

But just then a second form, well known to her, dashed forward, sweeping all before him, for he was backed by his crew.

"Holy Mother, you here, Mark Mortimer?" cried Captain Bess, for no skull mask hid the face that now was turned upon her.

"Hal it is you then, Buccaneer Bess!"

"We are well met, and I will send you after your father," was the savage retort of the man, who had now become a pirate officer.

Bessie seemed almost unnerved by her emotion at meeting the slayer of her father, and she would have been cut down by her bitter foe, had not Raoul Langdon sprung between them and caught the blow intended for her.

As he sunk to the deck he cried:

"For your sake, Bessie!"

But ere Mark Mortimer could follow up his advantage, there came a sudden shock against the vessel, and over the bulwarks, from a sloop that had run alongside, came Percy Wyndham, with half a hundred slaves at his back.

"At them, boys, and cut them down!"

The black crew gave a wild yell, and taken in the rear, the pirates, just in the moment of victory, were compelled to turn and meet them.

Instantly the fight became most savage, but Percy Wyndham cut his way through the pirate forces, and joined by Captain Bess and her men, soon drove them to cry for quarter, or to jump into the sea to save their lives.

Seeing that all was lost, Mark Mortimer placed a pistol to his head to thus end his days of dishonor.

But the hand was seized with an iron grip, and a hoarse voice cried in his ear:

"Hold! for your sister's sake I spare you the disgrace of dying on a pirate deck."

"Quick! into the cabin of the Jack-o'-lantern and await my coming!"

"Good God! you aiding me, Percy Wyndham?" cried Mark Mortimer, in amazement.

"Yes, but for your sister's sake! hasten to obey, or you will be lost."

The man bounded over the bulwarks, upon the deck of the Jack-o'-lantern, which had brought Percy Wyndham and his slaves to the rescue, and disappeared in the cabin as commanded.

Then the fruits of victory were gathered up, and Captain Bess gave a low wail of anguish, when it was told to her that Forrester the Freebooter had been thrown into the sea.

"And Mark Mortimer?" she gasped, as Percy Wyndham came near her.

"Sh—! for his sister's sake let it not be known that he died on a pirate deck," said Percy.

"True; but is he dead?"

"I saw him go over the side," was the evasive reply.

"Then I must submit to fate, though I did hope to see Forrester hanged, and that my own hand would take the life of Mark Mortimer," was the low reply, and, leaving all in the hands of Percy Wyndham she retired to the cabin almost overcome with emotion.

CONCLUSION.

THE capture of the pirate schooner Red Rover, by Captain Bess, whose name of Buccaneer Bess would cling to her also, created a great excitement on the Gulf coast, and all were glad that Forrester the Freebooter had at last gone to the bottom of the sea, for so it was reported of him.

As for Captain Bess, she seemed to feel that her work was finished and gave all over to Percy Wyndham to attend to for her, and, while he set sail for New Orleans with two schooners, she took the Jack-o'-lantern to re-

turn to her cabin home, its sable crew accompanying her, as their master directed.

And to that home she carried Raoul Langdon and Binnacle Ben, both severely wounded, to nurse them back to life.

When Percy Wyndham reached New Orleans, he released from his hiding-place in the Lioness, where he had transferred him, Mark Mortimer, placed in his hands a roll of bills, and bade him seek other lands.

The man made no reply, not even of thanks, and muffled in a heavy cloak, went ashore, not repentant, nor filled with gratitude, but still the bitter foe of the one who had so befriended him.

Amid the excitement over the capture of the Red Rover, and reported death of Forrester the Freebooter, came the startling news in the upper circles of New Orleans society, that Mabel Mortimer had been mysteriously saved by being picked up at sea, and was again at her beautiful home at The Everglades.

And as it was Percy Wyndham in his yacht who had saved her from death, rumor had it that the vendetta between the names of Wyndham and Mortimer was to be buried in the grave of the past, and that Mabel was to become the bride of her brave preserver.

As Mark Mortimer suddenly and mysteriously disappeared from the view of those who knew him well, the gossips had it that anger at his sister's marriage to her father's slayer had caused him to leave home forever.

But the reader knows that Mark Mortimer had a better reason far for banishing himself into obscurity.

As for Captain Bess, after the departure, wholly restored to health, of Raoul Langdon and Binnacle Ben, she continued to live on at her little cottage, seeing no one and spending her days as an exile, content to dwell away from humankind and brood over the bitter past, while the shadows lifted from other hearts, and sunshine fell upon them.

THE END.

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